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MEN BEHIND fantastic ADVENTURES

David Stone

PERSISTENT rumor to the contrary, I am not David Stone Martin. I was born David Karl Stone, at Reedsport, Oregon, in 1922. Nor, as myself (to scotch another myth), was I drafted last year. My four years in the Infantry were up in 1947, when I was honorably discharged as a First Lieutenant.

Since then, I've picked up a B. A. degree in Fine Arts at the University of Oregon, studied at the Art Center at Los Angeles and, for a year, painted and sketched my way through some of the most remote regions of Mexico, maintaining a studio at Morelia, Michoacan, and studying and holding a one-man show at the Universidad de Michoacan.

I've also exhibited at the Los Angeles Institute of Art, at the University of Oregon, and at Oregon State College (another one-man show).

Three years ago I high-tailed it across the country to New York. Five months ago (on, I blush to relate, Saint Valentine's Day), I married a beautiful doll.

Free-lance illustrating has been fun. I especially enjoy the adventuresome approach encouraged by the art editors of the Ziff-Davis Publishing Company.

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OCTOBER, 1952

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

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VOLUME 14 NUMBER 10

All Stories Complete

IS THIS THE WAY HOME? (Novel—20,000) ..... by Lawrence Chandler 8

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When Lura strayed out of the depot of the Interplanetary Railway, she had everything—except clothing! Naturally she picked the nudists as friends

IN A DAY OF VICTORY (Short—7,500) ..... by Irving E. Cox, Jr. 38

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

WE SPENT the major part of last week hunting for books on a rather obscure subject. It must have been obscure: we weren't able to find any books on it.

Anyway, we hit pay dirt in one bookstore, even though it wasn't what we had started out to look for. In a little place on upper Broadway there were a number of old best-sellers marked down to half price. Among the hundred or so books were four copies of WARRIOR OF THE DAWN, by Howard Browne, the first book our editor ever wrote, way back in 1943.

Since we have a file filled with requests for this particular title, we picked up all four copies and carried them over to the salesman, with our money.

"Pardon me, lady," he began, with a most curious expression on his face. "I don't like to get personal, but why should anybody want four copies of one book? Can't you read one copy four times?"

"Well..." we started, shaken by his logic.

"Oh—you must be Howard Browne!"

"Oh, no...uh...no," we stammered. "Uh...no. I.....uh...know the author."

He gave us a knowing smile. "Will you autograph one for me? I would appreciate it very much. Please, Miss."

"You don't understand. I'm not Howard Browne. I only—"

"Please, lady," he insisted, gently but firmly. "I've been in this business a long time. I know a modest writer when I see one. Please—autograph a copy for me. My little boy is reading this WARRIOR OF THE DAWN now."

Did you ever try to deny being somebody else? You can believe us, it isn't easy. The pen was in our hand, his pleading face inches from ours. What could we do?

So we wrote *Best wishes from Howard Browne* in our best remembrance of Howard's handwriting, and escaped with the other three copies which he gave us for free: "How can I possibly charge an author for his own book?"

He should ask the publishers—they'll tell him.

The reason we're mentioning the episode is this: if you hear rumors that Howard Browne is a girl, they're not true.

WE PICKED up an interesting bit of information the other day from a leading magazine. (Note how we always give due credit.) Did you know the small hummingbird was a very stupid little creature? He's not even smart enough to sense danger when he's stalked by a human being. He's so busy working for his own existence, he pays no attention to people, and so gets caught.

The giant hummingbird, on the other hand, is quite a clever *Patagonagigas*—that's the name of the species. (We're showing off our knowledge of bird lore now.) The 8 1/2-inch giant hummingbird, which is being publicly exhibited for the first time now at the Bronx Zoo, invariably gets the idea that a human is after it, and is clever enough to make a getaway. So that catching a *Patagonagigas* is quite a feather in a *Patagonagigas*-catcher's cap.

Th difference in physical size and comparative brain value doesn't apply to any other animal that we know of. Like man, for instance....

THE OTHER day the printer sent over a messenger to pick up some corrected galleys. We weren't quite ready, so suggested he take one of our magazines and read it while waiting. Imagine our chagrin when we walked up to him fifteen minutes later and found him stretched out sound asleep on our couch, our magazine in his hand. It must have been too warm in the room, the couch too comfortable, and he too tired. At least, that's what we keep telling ourselves. What else could it have been, to put him to sleep so fast?

..... LES

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SPACINEERING

By

Gordon Gutt

THE BLEND of space living and space engineering that will be an inevitable consequence of the time when Man goes into space, might be tied together in the term "spacineering". Naturally it's only engineering—done in space—but it's engineering of a higher and different order, in some ways easier, and in others harder than the types to which we've grown accustomed.

The first actual structures to be built in space are the space stations—at first one, then more. By now everyone is familiar with the general cart-wheel shape of these hypothetical halfway stations between the Moon and the Earth, these artificial satellites which encircle our planet endlessly, serving as fuel depots, observatories, and research plants. It is the engineering aspects of these structures which prove most fascinating.

It must be remembered that on a Space Station, which is in "free-fall", gravity—save for that induced intentionally by an artificial rotation—is nonexistent. Consequently, engineering is at one stroke freed from the problem of weight—only inertia remains. This means that most physical structures not intended to resist stresses, such as air pressure, need of necessity be only strong enough to hold together. As a result, a good deal of spacineering will be done with wire, thin rods, light aluminum beams, where on Earth ponderous steel constructions would be needed.

The handling and building of such structures entails a minimum of difficult work. Probably the only drawback is that the workman will be operating in spacesuits, not a particularly handicapping feature, considering what is being accomplished. While this gravity-free feature of spacineering is extremely useful, it must be remembered that inertia has still to be dealt with, and a hundred-and-sixty-pound mass of man cannot go bouncing in a thin aluminum rig into space any more than he can on Earth.

Spacineering will make use of the sphere and ellipsoid in those fixtures which will house humans—and air pressure. Fabrics and metals strong in tension will be used, with thin frames backing and supporting them. In this way the massiveness of heavy plates and beams is avoided. Hauling materials from Earth will be a costly, slow, uncertain process; consequently the lightest things will go up first—and the more things that can be light, the better.

Ether Energy

Yancey Artaugh

ASSUMING that the use of atomic energy as far as rocket propulsion goes will take some time and that men will be in space before that time, an interesting question arises. It comes from the assumption also that the familiar space station will be built and that, to rockets, this will be a way-station to the Moon and Mars and Venus. The question is: is there any way to obtain free energy in space?

Perhaps before that is asked, someone should ask, do we need free energy? The answer is, yes, of course. Living on a space station requires energy—energy for heating, for lighting, for operation of a thousand and one gadgets ranging from radio and radar transmitters to electric stoves and air and water-pumping equipment. If there is no source of energy, fuel will have to be brought from Earth in the form of gases which could be much more usefully employed as rocket propellants. Every pound, every ounce of matter brought from the Earth exacts too heavy a toll in precious fuels to permit these to be wasted, and hence a fuel or energy source is needed—something utterly independent of the Earth.

Now the answer to the original question can be given—yes! Yes, there is an energy source in space, an inexhaustible one too, whose fruits are for the garnering—the Sun!

It's a familiar powerful source too, as anyone who has ever got a sun-burn can testify. Or recall focusing the sunlight through a small lens or with a small mirror. Scientists have even built powerful sun-furnaces for melting metals! The Sun is a practical source of energy indeed. In airless space the rays come down concentrated, virulent, powerful.

It will be a simple matter to erect a reflecting mirror capable of bringing the Sun's rays to a focus upon a conventional mercury-vapor boiler. This mercury-vapor boiler will in turn drive a turbine which will spin a generator, and all the electric power the space station can use will be had for the taking. No fuss, no bother, no complications. And plenty of juice!

The construction of a large mirror, perhaps hundreds of feet in diameter, presents no challenging engineering problems when erected in the free-fall volume of a space-station. There are no stresses to buttress against. The lightest of structures will be as rigid as Earthly steel beams. The merest shell construction of aluminum rods and thin aluminum sheet (perhaps even foil!) will be more than strong enough.

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As Lura went end-over-end, the little Martian apologized

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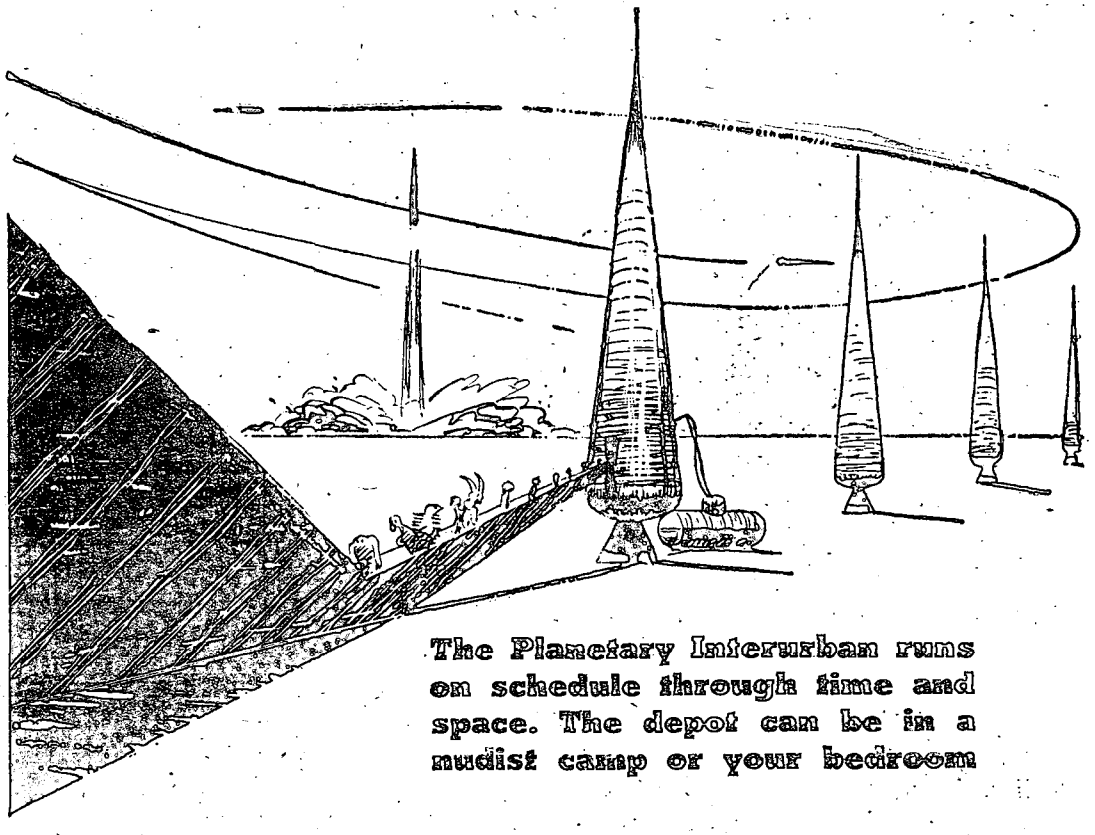

The Planetary Interurban runs on schedule through time and space. The depot can be in a nudist camp or your bedroom

IS THIS THE WAY HOME?

By Lawrence Chandler

"MOTHER, what planet is this?"

"Don't bother me, child. I've got to get these tickets straightened out."

"But it is a planet, isn't it? We *are* stopping?" Plura was sure of it because the silver haze was evaporating. Forms were taking shape around the train. That meant a depot or a point of changeover.

Plura was becoming bored with depots and changeovers. She had exhausted the novelty of computing continua and time variations, points of warp and transfer reinforcements. In any time interpretation, the trip had been a long one, and the anticipation of arriving on Ursion Seven had been blunted.

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Plura turned bored eyes on her mother. The latter's horns were pink from vexation as she attempted to straighten out the mess of tape in her lap. The feathers on her winged heels fluttered as she said, "Why do they cling to this antiquated ticket system, I'd like to know! Punching out sections at every stop!"

"But, Mother—didn't you say this is an antiquated line?"

"It certainly is. Next time we'll take Star Lanes. The units we save on these unscheduled transfers just aren't worth it."

Plura yawned. "Mother—what language are we speaking?"

"English, I think," her mother replied absently.

Plura consulted her guide book. "Then this must be Terra." She pursed her red lips as she scanned the subheads in the guide book. "That would mean we're in the section of Terra called—oh, here it is—England."

Plura's mother answered with a small corner of her mind as she wrestled with the tape. "That doesn't necessarily follow. English is spoken on many parts of Terra."

The forms outside the car windows had taken shape and had become solidified now. Plura's mother got to her feet, bundling the tape in her two hands. "I've got to find the transfer agent. You stay here. Don't go roaming, because this is a backward planet."

Plura watched idly as her mother left the compartment in a quick rustle of heel feathers. Then Plura lay back on the lounge and let her mind drift along a natural course, along lines her mother's parting words had generated. Prior to the admonition, Plura had had no thought of roaming. But the mention of a backward planet interested her. What was a backward planet? What made it that way?

Pondering these points, Plura felt an urge to find out. There was certainly no harm, she thought, in visiting the depot. All warp points were shielded behind light curves. Natives of stopover planets could live right next door to a depot and not know of its existence. No harm in visiting the depot. Setting her head at a defiant angle, Plura opened the compartment door and looked around. A sign on the wall said: *In case of fire, walk—don't fly—to the nearest exit.* Obediently, Plura walked to the vestibule door and stepped out onto the platform.

She was surrounded immediately by a crowd; a motley cross-section of humanity in transit. Plura recognized some of the figures. There were the *gorods* from Continuum Four Section Seven—perfect globes with no protuberances—the most intelligent entities in existence. There were the vari-shaped entities of this continuum—the Venusians with six brains in various parts of their biped bodies. There were the rockmen of Neptune, capable of existence in incredible temperatures.

And there were other forms entirely unfamiliar to Plura. Her horns glittered silver in wonderment as she wandered about the depot, bewitched by the bustle, the color, the newness of strange people from far places. Entirely bemused, she was startled by the touch of a hand upon her body.

Plura turned, wide-eyed. She did not draw away. The reflex of surprise was not quite strong enough. But there was a slight uneasiness within her. The green biped Martian's action in putting forth his hand seemed deliberate—the grin on his face had something in it that disturbed Plura. Why, she wondered, would anyone

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touch her in that manner deliberately. Obviously the Martian enjoyed touching her.

SHE MATCHED his facial expression as best she could—a thing any polite person would do—and touched him also. The greeting over, she drew away. But the Martian wished to continue the formality. Plura's uneasiness increased as he pressed toward her. She gave ground. The Martian's expression indicated an increase in emotional tension. He was pressing forward with all the eagerness of an old friend. Yet he wasn't an old friend. Plura wished suddenly that her mother were present to give guidance. Plura didn't wish to be impolite, but—

The Martian's eagerness was undisguised now. His breath was in Plura's face. She took another step backward and felt an icy draft upon her back. The effect was electric. She whirled, but in doing so managed only to get more of her body in range of the icy blast—enough so that the blast snatched at her, spun her about in a seething blind void, and hurled her upward like a chip in a mill race.

Her heels were of no help whatever in this maelstrom of undiluted time. That's what the icy blast was, of course. She realized what had happened even as she whirled and tumbled, helpless, in space-time. She had moved past a danger sign and the vortex of the depot shield had taken her into its grip. Plura doubted that even her mother would have known what to do under these circumstances. So Plura could only fall back on her training—her upbringing. She could almost hear her mother's voice over and above the roar of uncontrolled time: "Be a good girl, Plura, and always conform. The well-bred girl allows the other person his or her way in all situations. That is the mark of genteel breeding."

As Plura whirled through the time channel, she resolved—as a bulwark against her fears—to be a good girl.

MARTHA CONROY was of interest because: first, she was a happy woman—and second, she was the wife of a millionaire. The first fact was not, however, based upon the second. Martha was happy because—well, because she was Martha, and for no other reason. A sweet, motherly person with two grown children—Nick, twenty-two, and Linda, eighteen—Martha would have been happy as the wife of an underpaid street cleaner. She was called *flighty, a mental lightweight,* and various other names by her friends, but always with a tone of affection which removed the sting from the appellations.

She awoke this morning, as usual, at eight-fifteen, got out of bed, crossed the room and tapped upon Sam Conroy's door. "Good morning, dear," she lilted. "What would you like for breakfast?"

A noncommittal growl came through the panel, after which Martha smiled again, tenderly, and went to her dressing table. Sam Conroy never replied to her question, knowing full well that Martha had nothing whatsoever to do with breakfast. Breakfast was, even then, ready and waiting under hot covers downstairs. But Martha always asked the question and Sam always grunted.

Her hair brushed into place, Martha crossed the closet to select a morning coat. She threw back the door and studied the array of expensive garments hanging before her. She selected one and took it from the rack.

Then, as she was closing the door,

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her eye fell upon a nude girl seated on the floor. The girl appeared to be dizzy, as from a violent ten cent's worth on a merry-go-round. She was naked except for a pair of beautifully curling horns—if they could be classed as clothing—and two small wings on her heels.

Getting into the morning coat, Martha smiled tenderly. "Darling," she said, "you should put something on. You'll catch your death, you know." With that, she closed the closet door and went downstairs to breakfast with her family.

NICK CONROY scowled as he came down the stairs. He had a problem. Not a new one. The same problem that had been plaguing him for weeks. Here he was, in possession of a really great race horse—one that could beyond all doubt run circles around anything in four shoes—and he was still unable to cash in on the potential value of the beast. "There's got to be a way to break Star King," he muttered. "There's *got* to be."

Nick was worrying about the Grand Oaks steeple chase coming along and Star King's refusal to take jumps unless he just happened to be so inclined. The Grand Oaks cup was something Nick fairly itched to own. With Star King working rationally, the cup would be a cinch.

Nick noted he was the first one down, dropped into his chair, and stared moodily into an empty coffee cup.

LINDA CONROY awakened, turned over and stretched like a kitten. But a gorgeous kitten. Linda slept raw because she liked the feel of satin sheets when she rolled over. And the satin sheets on Linda's bed were indeed privileged. A no more smooth, sleek body than Linda's could possibly have rested between them.

A tiny crease broke the even line of Linda's brow. If the resulting expression was a frown, it only added to her general attractiveness. Her problem had to do with something more personal than a race horse. It hinged on the wisdom of trial marriage.

Maybe Danny was right, she pondered. Maybe the reason for so many short marriages was undiscovered incompatibilities in the principals. Wasn't it sensible, after all, to find out first? But then again, how much could one find out over a weekend? A weekend could possibly be arranged without the respective families, knowing. But certainly no more than that.

A slight twinge of conscience smote Linda as she got out of bed and went in to turn on the shower. Was it the possibilities of a happy marriage she was interested in? Or things far more tangible and physical? Morality demanded that a wedding ring be worn by a girl who delved into the delicious mysteries which—most naturally—interested Linda. After all, she was a healthy, normal, beautiful animal; and at an age when the answers to certain questions are of paramount importance.

Why, Linda pouted, were the moralists always tying strings to fascinating possibilities? Why wasn't the world a simple, uncomplicated place where you just went ahead and did what comes naturally? Just now, Danny was very attractive to her. But how did she know what her feeling would be a year from today? Soaping herself vigorously, she resented the moral standards as mid-Victorian remnants clinging to a new and swiftly moving age.

But, somehow, she couldn't quite make herself accept the idea....

When she came down to breakfast,

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she found Nick slowly stirring a cup of coffee. She said, "Morning, stable boy. Last time I saw you, you were flying through the air over the third jump. I see you landed all right."

"Cut it out. I'm in no mood."

"You're never in any mood. Why don't you get rid of that beast?"

"Talk sense! Star King's a great horse. He just needs straightening out."

"He'll break you before you break him."

Nick glanced at his sister. "By the way—aren't you spending too much time in Danny Kane's convertible? What about that guy? You using him for practice, or are you going to get married?"

Before Linda could think of an answer, Martha Conroy's cheerful tones rang from the staircase. "Good morning, children." A moment later she and Sam appeared in the dining room. "Did you sleep well, darlings?"

SAM CONROY disappeared behind the paper—opened to the financial section—which was already propped against his water glass. Linda smiled vaguely at her mother, her thoughts on Danny's parting words of the night before: *"We're getting older every hour, darling. The golden moments are fleeting."* Danny, she decided, was right.

Nick grunted at his mother's question and went on with his thoughts.

"...and the flowers were really beautiful. Didn't you think the flowers were beautiful, dear?"

The pause made Sam Conroy realize his wife had stopped speaking. Therefore, she had asked a question. He said, "Eh? Oh yes. Quite true, dear."

That started Martha's prattle again, and everyone went back to thinking his own thoughts.

"...and there was that poor girl sitting on the floor of my closet without any clothes on. She had horns, dear, and—as I remember it—some sort of wings on her feet. Don't you think that very strange, dear?"

"Eh? What? Oh yes, dear. Very strange indeed."

"I don't remember seeing her around before." Martha cocked a bright eye at her daughter. "Linda, you didn't have guests last night, did you? Possibly the poor girl was looking for the—"

Sam Conroy had pushed his paper out of the way. He was staring at his wife. "What did you say, Martha?"

"I was telling you about this girl—"

Both Nick and Linda were now also staring at their mother.

"I know," Linda said. "It's mother's way of finding out if we're paying attention."

Nick growled, "Why would a girl be wearing wings on her heels?" Then he jerked erect. "Mom. Start over. Tell it slowly."

Martha's pause was one of triumph at having interested her entire family at the same time. Up to this moment she had had difficulty in interesting them even singly. "I was saying that when I went to get my housecoat, this girl—a pretty little thing—was sitting in my closet. She had no clothes on—"

While Sam was glancing at his children with an alarm reading very plainly: *The old girl's gone off her nut,* Linda cried, "Mother! You're fooling! Really! A naked girl!"

"I don't see what's so strange about that. I've never been able to make you wear a nightgown."

"But I'm not a strange girl in somebody's closet! Oh, really, Mother."

Martha had turned her eyes on

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Nick. "You didn't have any guests, did you, dear—oh, no. Of course not."

"Stop it!" Sam Conroy barked. We may be a zany family, but we're not this crazy. Cut it out—all of you."

Martha achieved an expression of injury. "Why...Sam. I don't think you believe me. And after all these years. Don't you think that's a little unfair?"

Sam had been backed into a corner by his wife's "unlogic" before. He turned back to his eggs, but not before a final sally. "Well, if there was a girl in your closet, why didn't you invite her down to breakfast?"

"With no clothes on, Sam? Now, after all—"

"I give up," Sam muttered, and went down behind his paper.

Linda was staring hard at her mother. "I really believe she means it. I really do."

"Act your age," Nick snapped at her.

"I believe it enough to go see, anyhow."

"Bring me a picture," Nick said.

Sam looked up from his paper. "I think this is carrying a gag too far. Trying to get us to traipse upstairs. You won't catch me—"

Nick was eyeing his egg thoughtfully. "Nude, eh? And with horns—"

"—No, sir. You won't catch me falling for it," Sam said, as he got to his feet and followed Linda toward the stairs.

MARTHA brought up the rear. In fact, Linda had lost ground by this time and was running a bad show to her brother and her sire. Martha's slightly plaintive voice slowed them down not a bit. "I don't think this is the right thing to do—really I don't. Two men rushing in on a girl this way. Maybe she wants privacy."

"If she does, she picked a hell of a place to get it," Sam said. "And a hell of a way." At the door to Martha's room, Sam stopped and turned, his hand on the knob. He seemed a little conscious, suddenly, of his quick enthusiasm in this matter.

"There's no girl in there, of course. I just want to call your mother on one of these screwball deals and maybe stop them once and for all."

Linda smiled like a knowing Cheshire cat. "And a most interesting one to follow through on, right, Pater?"

Without answering, Sam threw open the door and went inside. The rest followed close on his heels.

"Which closet?" Sam demanded.

Martha crossed the room and opened the door somewhat timidly, as though a little frightened at the excitement she'd caused. A little surprised, too.

"Are you in there, dear?" she called in a gentle voice.

Except for a row of expensive gowns, coats and robes, the closet was empty.

"See?" Sam said. "Nobody there. Not a soul." There was a triumph in his voice. But also a disappointment.

Linda said, "Mother—why *do* you do these things to us? Has it something to do with exerting your ego? Is this one your psychiatrist advised?"

Nick had been making a more complete investigation. He had pushed the clothing aside, uncovering areas in which not even a midget, unclothed or otherwise, could have hidden. Now he bent down and straightened up, holding two small, silvery feathers.

Sam said, "Well, I'll be darned. She even used props!" He turned to his wife. "Martha, this sort of thing has got to stop."

His wife looked at him with bewilderment. "I'm sure she was in here, Sam. I didn't go into your room this morning, did I? My housecoat

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wouldn't have been in your clos—"

"Now wait a minute!" Sam threw up his hands. "Oh, what's the use? I've got to get to work!"

Nick stood staring silently at the two small feathers he held in his fingers. He twirled them until they gave off a silver radiance. He looked uneasily about the room.

JONAS DANGERFIELD, perspiring copiously, stood facing the wrath of a mother who had lost her child. Bad enough that some lamebrain had jeopardized the whole transfer point, but said lamebrain had to be the brat of a Fourth Spacer with a tongue like a razor.

"But, madam," Jonas was saying, "why didn't you watch your child? I realize how you feel, but I'd say you've done me more potential damage than I've done you. A naked woman running around outside could cause this whole junction to be closed. As a matter of fact, it probably will be closed, if there is the slightest touch of adverse publicity. The lines don't like that sort of thing. How do you think they've hidden their existence from the uninitiated for the last ten thousand years?"

"The hell with your line," the woman snapped. "And stop babbling. I don't care if they close your one-horse station or not. I want my daughter back!"

"We'll make every effort, of course. But there is a point we must discuss. Just how smart is your br—your daughter? Will she keep her mouth shut? After all—"

"How do I know? This is a backward planet. They wear clothes here. Everyone expects everyone else to wear clothes. When they see her running around naked—"

"That point isn't of too much importance. It is my opinion that people won't think it at all strange—"

"Are you crazy? Of course they will!"

Jonas Dangerfield smiled. "My good lady. Do you think we're stupid—?"

"Yes!"

"Don't interrupt me. We have made allowances for such occurrences as this. The station, while invisible from the outside, still has to be located somewhere—within a blind of some sort. Don't you think we have sense enough to see that the blind serves its purpose?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. And I don't care. I just want my daughter back—and quick. Or I'll go out after her myself."

"Just be patient, madam. We're doing our very best."

"It's not good enough. Do better."

SAM CONROY had a tiny room high in one of the cupolas of the Conroy mansion. He kept it locked. It contained nothing more than an easy chair in front of the window and the best pair of binoculars money could buy.

So it followed that, when Jonas Dangerfield knocked on the front door of the Conroy home and Sam happened to be close enough to answer it, Sam knew Jonas without being introduced. In fact, he knew details of Jonas' anatomy that were indeed surprising. Sam, caught off guard, said, "Oh, hello. You're the fellow that runs the nud—ah, what can I do for you?"

"I'm Jonas Dangerfield, the proprietor of the Sunnydale Nudist Colony down in the woods."

"Oh, is that so?"

"I've come to inquire about one of our—ah, guests. It seems she wandered away."

Sam was brightly sympathetic. "That's too bad. Was she wearing—"

"I'm afraid not."

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Sam wondered if it was one of the blondes. Or maybe that little brunette who liked to play leapfrog. Probably not, he thought. Probably one of those old bags who were, in themselves, the greatest argument against nudism.

"We hope to round her up—I mean, persuade her to come back and put her clothes on as soon as possible. I just called to find out if she had been seen around here. We certainly don't want any trouble—"

"Oh, no trouble at all," Sam said. "We like to be good neighbors. We like to cooperate. In fact, I'll get my hat and help you hunt for her. Wait a minute."

Jonas waited, and within a few minutes he and Sam were exploring the estate—the latter poking hopefully into bushes and thickets here and there.

Suddenly Sam stopped. "Say—I just remembered something. My wife said she found a—say, this gal wasn't made up for a masquerade or something, was she?"

"What do you mean?"

"The wife said something about horns and wings on her heels. My son found a couple of feathers."

Jonas tried to hide his concern. "You didn't catch the girl?"

"No, she was gone when we investigated. As a matter of fact, I thought my wife was seeing things."

"Let's keep on hunting," Jonas said grimly.

AFTER FINISHING his breakfast, Nick Conroy headed, as usual, for the stables. He had about given up hope of doing anything with Star King, but he was going to take one more try at it. An evil-tempered beast, Star King could be depended upon to attempt murder whenever anyone came within ten feet of him. But Nick could see no reason why the horse should have disappeared completely.

However, this was true. The boxstall was empty, and without any of its reinforced walls having been kicked out.

Upset at having a potential killer on the loose, Nick saddled another horse and started a search. He left the stable by the south bridle path, feeling it the most likely route Star King would have taken. There was no chance of trailing the brute, because there were many tracks on the path and nothing distinctive about Star King's footwear.

It was a perfect spring morning, already warm from a yellow sun in a clear blue sky. But the beauty was lost on Nick. He was too worried about what a killer like Star King might do when left to his own pursuits.

Nick followed the bridle path to a point where it came parallel with the creek which formed one of the barriers for the steeplechase several miles beyond the estate. His senses alert, Nick strained to pick up any sound that might indicate the presence of excellent, though unpredictable, horse flesh. But no sounds came. He rode on, until a barked exclamation made his mare start violently.

"Damn these damn briars! Damn if I don't think we're on the wrong track!"

And Nick came out onto the edge of some lush meadowland to find his father swearing wholeheartedly at the thorns biting into his ankles. Sam Conroy was accompanied by a lean, sunburned man Nick couldn't place. Nick said, "Dad! I thought you went to work. What on earth are you doing out here?"

SAM CONROY bristled. "It's my land, isn't it? I worked my brain to the bone getting enough money to

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buy it, didn't I? Who's got—"

"Look—I'm not questioning your rights to—"

"A man puts his hard-earned dough into a hunk of real estate and then a member of his own family puts up a grouse when he decides to take a little walk—"

"Dad! Cut it out. What are you trying to cover up?"

"Cover up?"

"When you act this way it's because of a guilty conscience. I've seen it before. What are you hunting for out here? Who's your friend?"

"Oh—him. Name of Dangerfield." Sam flicked his companion a warning look. "He owns a little property over the way. Was thinking about—"

"The nudist colony?"

"Huh? What do you know about a nudist colony?"

"Who doesn't know about it?" Nick grinned. "You left your little room unlocked one day. I just happened to—"

"You stay out of there! That's where I go to meditate. When business cares get too heavy, I—"

"Look, Dad. I'm not a little boy any more. I know about those things. Now, suppose you tell me what you're doing out here."

"Mr.—Mr. Dangerfield lost a dog. That's it—a pedigreed dog he's nuts about. I'm helping him look for it. Now, suppose you tell me what you're hunting for?"

"Star King got loose."

"That damn killer? I told you he ought to be destroyed."

"I'll find him. And if you bump into him while you're looking for your dog, just climb a tree and yell. I can handle him all right."

"Maybe we'd better get on with our hunt," Jonas Dangerfield said with some uneasiness. "That—that dog is very valuable."

"Okay," Sam Conroy agreed. "Let's cut around the meadow where it's easy walking."

Nick watched his father out of sight, then went slowly on down the bridle path. Funny. Strange indeed, Conroy Senior's sudden willingness to help a neighbor hunt for a lost dog. Such cooperation was definitely not one of Sam Conroy's traits. Nick had the feeling his father was covering up, somehow. But the whole thing didn't seem too important. And when Star King neighed from beyond a thick grove of trees to the right, Nick forgot everything else.

He swung the mare in that direction and found a winding path through the trees. A hundred or so feet from the creek, he reined up sharply. *I'm going mad,* he thought. *I'm not going there. I've already arrived. I'm stark raving nuts.* He rubbed his eyes and looked again.

It was not Star King he saw, but a very beautiful, entirely nude girl sitting by the creek engaged in certain ablutions. A girl with horns on her head and wings on her feet. Other details of her gorgeous anatomy could hardly be described in such short detail.

NICK, ENCOMPASSED in a whirl of wonder, found himself off the mare and halfway to the creek before he awakened and realized he was still on earth. He noted, and strictly in passing, that Star King, now completely docile and seemingly content, was cropping grass a few feet away from the naked nymph.

Nick stopped by the creek bank. "Hello."

"Hello."

He didn't know what to do or what to say. The situation was one out of a senseless dream. He asked, "Aren't you—aren't you cold?"

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"No. Not in the least."

"Of course not. How stupid of me. It's a warm morning. No one gets cold on a warm spring morning, even without—say, are you from the—the nudist colony?"

"The nudist colony? Oh, no! I'm from Lodora Five. A Fourth Spacer."

"Is that so? Well—what do you know about that?"

"My mother and I were going to see relatives in Space Seven. I fell through the shield at the depot."

"No! I'm awfully sorry."

"I'd like to go home. Could you please tell me how to get there?"

"Oh, certainly. I'd be delighted to—where did you say you lived?"

"Lodora Five. But if you could just tell me how to get back to the depot."

"There's a New York Central station at Lynnville. That's about seven miles."

"Does the Quadraplanet Excursion Special stop there?"

"I—I hardly think so. I—"

Nick was trying desperately to achieve reorientation. It was a difficult process. There was something so completely unreal about this. In fact, everything about it was unreal—unfamiliar—except the body in which this strange girl was housed. Said body was very real; in every respect.

And now Star King added a normal note to the scene by coming close to the horned girl, nickering softly, and thrusting a velvet nose into her hand. This gave Nick a new and more solid conversational springboard. "Star King likes you. That's a compliment. He never liked anyone before. He's a mean horse."

"Mean? Oh, no. I went to his house and asked him if he could show me the way home, but he speaks a different language than was on the Automatic Articulator—this language we're speaking now—and I guess he isn't of a dominating race."

"No, I guess not. What—what is an Automatic Articulator?"

"The unit that charges a traveler's memory with the language spoken in any zone the traveler reaches. It saves having to learn many languages one may never use again."

"Of course. How stupid of me. But about Star King—"

"When I was leaving his house he wanted to leave too. I thought maybe he planned to take me to the station. But he brought me here and I couldn't find the shield. I guess he just wanted to take a walk."

NICK FELT a sudden conviction that he was being given a very elaborate business. He checked the possibility and then discarded it. This had to be—whatever else it was—strictly the McCoy. No one could devise, on the spur of the moment, such a complicated business as this. However, some of the shock was now wearing off, and Nick could think with a shade more control and intelligence. Suddenly he remembered something. "Say. Were you in my mother's closet this morning? She came downstairs with a wild story about a nak—I mean about finding a girl in her closet. I went up there and found a couple of feathers—say, what's your name?"

"I am called Plura." She looked down at her heels. "Yes. I could have lost some feathers in that little room. I'm moulting, you know."

"You are?" He stared at her dreamily. "Plura. That's a pretty name." Nick, after all, was still human. And he was facing unadorned beauty that would have shaken a man of even extraordinary will-power. He found himself standing very close to the girl. And something told him: *This is a gag. It's got to be a gag. It's somebody's idea of a joke, and I think it's*

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about time for me to react.

"You're very pretty," Nick said.

"Yes," Plura answered. "In Lodora Five I am rated in the top bracket of Desirability. That gives me the privilege of rejecting the first two men who come with the desire to have children. Reject them, that is, if I want to."

The thing intrigued Nick. "Suppose you weren't in the top bracket? What would you have to do then?"

"Then I'd have to accept the first positive that came along."

"Positive?"

Plura's blue eyes narrowed with concentration, "Male—man—those are your terms. Even with the Automatic Articulator, one can get confused at times. You see, I'd be called a negative in my country."

"I get the point," Nick said hurriedly. "But about my mother's closet. How did you get in there?"

"That was where I landed after the time shield threw me out of the depot. I remember a woman opened the door and said something pleasant. Then she closed the door and I had to get out by myself."

"You mean you just walked out of the house and down to the stable?"

"No. I flew out the window. I didn't start walking until I came to the trees. It's rather hard to fly among trees."

That statement was so patently absurb, it brought Nick back to solid ground and he realized he'd gotten sidetracked. There was something he'd planned to do. But even with the resolve clear in his mind, he couldn't just do it. He had to ask first. He said, "I'm going to kiss you."

Plura looked at him with wide-eyed politeness. "Of course. Would you prefer I stood up, or will you come down here?"

"I'll—I'll come down there."

Nick went to his knees, close to the girl, and enfolded her in his arms. There was neither coyness nor resistance in her. Rather, a certain clumsiness, as though she wished to cooperate but wasn't sure how to go about it.

NICK KISSED her. He drew back. He kissed her a second time. Plura had learned fast and the second kiss was more of a success. Slightly dizzy, Nick drew back, held her at arm's length. "You—you don't object?"

"Oh, no. I had a very proper upbringing. My mother told me to be a good girl."

Nick frowned. "That's all very fine, but I don't get the connection. A good girl—"

"—is always polite. She never tries to get her own way. She is agreeable with strangers at all times." Plura drew back now, a look of obvious worry on her face.

"Is something troubling you?" Nick spoke the words hopefully, realizing, as he did so, that he definitely wanted this girl to be troubled. It would be a shame if such a beautiful creature turned out to be a—

"Yes. Back in the depot there was a Martian. I—I wasn't cooperative. If I had been, I wouldn't be in this mess now. It just proves that Mother always knows best."

"I'm not sure about that. Anyhow—you keep right on being uncooperative with Martians until you can check with Mother." He was looking deep into her eyes now, and his breath was coming heavily. He was having some trouble with his breath. He said, huskily, "You mean you'd cooperate in—in everything?"

"Of course." To prove it, she came closer.

As she pressed against him, Nick disengaged himself with almost clumsy

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speed, and stepped back. Unconsciously, his hand went into his pocket and came forth with a handkerchief. He wiped his brow. "No," he said firmly. "I have a mother too, and I don't think she'd approve of my— Let's talk about something else." He reached out and touched one of Plura's finely curved horns. "Can you take these off?"

"No. Only a posi-a man can do that."

Nick reached out with his other hand. "Fine. Then let's—"

"I lose them when I produce a child."

Nick hurriedly withdrew both hands. "In that case, we won't worry about them for a while. I—"

"They come back again when I'm ready to produce a second child."

"I see." Nick was eyeing Plura narrowly, his mind going back to original, basic problems. Not that he was without wonder relative to this situation, or that he believed it. But Nick was of a pliant nature. He could stand up under shock more than most people. "Star King likes you," he said.

"He's a very nice person."

"Not a person. A horse. An animal. But a horse fills a very definite niche in our scheme of things."

"What niche?"

"They run in steeplechases. If they're good, they win, and that gives their owners a real lift. A positive sense of accomplishment and superiority."

"You mean the owners feel accomplishment and superiority for something the horse does without their help?"

"The horse needs their help. And that's where you come in. Star King likes you. I've got a hunch he'd do things for you that he wouldn't do for me."

"What things?"

"Well, I think he'd take all the jumps in the Grand Oaks Cup, for one thing. With you up on him—"

"Up on him?"

"Sitting on his back. Riding him."

"Why would I want to ride him? I can go faster than he can."

"It's the—the custom. Let's put it that way. In this Grand Oaks Cup, all the horses line up at the barrier and run a certain distance over a track marked with jumps and barriers. Each horse must have a—a person riding it. A jockey, we call the person. The one that wins—as I said—brings its owner great honor. Now, because Star King likes you so well, it occurred to me—could you—would you—say, how long do you expect to be around?"

"Only until I can find my way home. Mother will be worried."

Nick could go along with that. "I wonder if she's as much worried as she should be? Evidently, people—men—are different in your—wherever you come from."

There was a certain dreaminess, newly awakened, in Plura's eyes. "They may be—but I think I like the men in this world better."

"You do? Why?"

"They're more interesting, somehow. That is, if you're an indication—"

"I'm not," Nick said quickly. "Not entirely. And if you're going to be around here long, I think I'd better get you some clothes."

"You mean those things you're covered with?"

"Yes. It's the—the custom."

"Such a quaint custom."

"It has its advantages. In your case, however, the clothes are a little different. I'll get you some."

"I think it would be—" Plura cocked her head in quick thought. "—fun. Do I say it right?"

"It goes beyond fun. I'm just trying to figure out where I can put

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The little Martian simply couldn't understand why people kept fainting

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you until—"

"I'll wander around and see if I can't find the way to the depot. There's got to be a way back."

NICK WAS staring at the beautifully tanned girl with what he hoped was impersonal concern. But never in his life had he found it more difficult to be impersonal, and he was afraid he was making a bad job of it. "I've got a hunch that might be—well, dangerous."

"Why?"

"This philosophy of good breeding your mother taught you. It may have been all right where you came from, but here you might run into trouble. Some of the males hereabouts might not be above taking advantage of you."

Plura wondered at that. "This seems a rather strange planet. Why would anyone do that?"

"If you don't know, angel, I haven't the time to tell you. It might take too long to get my point over. If I could get you back to the stable, with Star King, do you think you could stay under cover a while? Until I can at least get you some clothes?"

"I suppose so. If you'll help me find the way home, later."

"I'll do my best. You'd better ride Star King back. Here—I'll give you a a hand up."

"You mean sit on him?"

"That's the general idea."

"I won't need any help." Plura got to her feet. There was a flutter of wings. She arose into the air and came gracefully down astride the spirited horse.

Nick blinked. "At least," he muttered, "there was nothing phony about *that*."

"What did you say?"

"I said I'll have to get you a hat —**to** cover up those horns. Don't know what we can do about the wings. Do they fold back?"

Plura looked down at the small wings on her heels. "I suppose they would. I never really tried it."

"Well, let's see if we can get back to the stables without being seen. If you see anybody coming, jump for the bushes."

"Very well—if you say," Plura agreed doubtfully. This was certainly a strange world into which she'd stumbled. And all because of a green Martian. This Earthman was cute, though. Somehow he stirred within Plura a sense of regret at the way things were done on her own planet.

THE MAID found Martha Conroy in the library. The maid said, "Pardon me, Madam, but there is a—a strange woman at the door."

Martha was crocheting a doily. She looked up brightly. "That's nice, my dear. Ask her in."

The maid looked doubtful. "I don't know, Madam—I'm not sure. This woman is—very strange."

"What's strange about her, dear?"

"The way she's dressed, for one thing."

"What is she wearing?"

"A pair of rubber boots and a big sombrero."

"Rubber boots! Good heavens! It's not raining."

"No, Madam. The sun is shining."

"Most unusual." Martha Conroy let the doily drop into her lap and looked up quickly. "Marie. The way you said that. With such—such finality. Is that *all* the woman is wearing?"

"Oh, no, Madam. She also has on a very heavy man's winter overcoat. I—I don't think we should let her in."

"Very well. I'll go out and see her."

"But, Madam! Suppose she is—not right? Unbalanced!"

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"My dear," Martha said, with both motherliness and mock severity, "What possible reason have you to think such a thing? The charitable deed and act. That's what we must always keep in mind."

Marie shrugged. "Very well, Madam. We will be charitable." This, she thought to herself, was really a doozy of a joint. An oversexed master. An underbrained mistress. A pair of brats who were strictly for the birds. Oh, well. If the screwball waiting outside suddenly came up with a meat-axe and separated the mistress into two sections, it was her own doing.

Martha put aside her doily and went to the front door. It was a long walk, but the woman the maid had identified as strange was still waiting.

"Good day," Martha said, with a neighborly sweetness upon which she prided herself.

The visitor apparently didn't think so. She made no statement in support of the observation. She said, "I'm looking for my daughter. I think you'd better produce her."

Martha smiled gently. "You poor woman. You're overwrought. I haven't got your daughter. What makes you think—?"

"I gave that oaf at the depot a reasonable time to produce her and then came through the—came to get her myself."

"But I repeat: why do—"

"I did some visualizing. You wouldn't know what I'm talking about, but I saw you shove my daughter into a closet. Then I saw a ferocious animal chasing her, not to mention the male members of your group here. The last I saw was one of your males taking advantage of her innocence. Rather spotty visualization possibly, but I saw what I saw, and I want my daughter back before it's too late."

"Would you care for a cup of tea?" Martha asked hopefully.

"Why should I want a cup of tea? What *is* a cup of tea, anyhow?"

MARTHA realized she was out of her depth with this strange woman. That, so far as Martha was concerned, was a sweeping concession—one with which she would not have complimented even Einstein. "Why—why everybody knows what a cup of tea is—"

"I don't, but it's not important. I don't want one. I want my daughter."

"Why do you wear those outlandish boots—and that hat?"

"To hide my horns and wings. Stop hedging. Have you still got my daughter locked in your closet, or was that before the young male got his hands on her?"

"I really don't know what you're talking about," Martha said, with a touch of hysteria. "I—oh, yes—there was a girl in my closet this morning. I remember now."

"It's about time. We'll go there and get her."

"She isn't there now. We went back—the whole family—and all we found were two little feathers."

"That's quite natural. She was moulting. Where did she go?"

"I—I really don't know. Did you say horns and wings?"

"That's what I said."

"Strange. The girl in my closet had horns and wings. But I thought they were—were hallucinations."

"They were just what they appeared to be. Do you people think you are the only ones ever created?"

"I really haven't given it much thought. I—"

"You wouldn't. What do you think happened to my daughter? You say she was in your closet and then wasn't there."

"I can't say what happened to her."

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"I don't understand you. Is it the ordinary thing to find girls lying around in your closets on this planet?"

Martha Conroy felt at a loss. When people started asking searching questions, she always felt at a loss. "I—I really can't say—no, I guess it isn't the sort of thing one expects. Really—you get me quite bewildered."

"I'm afraid you were born bewildered."

"May I ask why you are wearing that heavy overcoat? It's quite warm today, you know."

The woman flung the coat open. Martha squealed. "Please! After all!"

"This coat was all I could find after I jumped through the shield. I understand a person has to wear something on this prudish planet. Now—about my daughter."

"I know," Martha squealed in sudden triumph. "You're from that horrid nudist colony! I'm going to talk to my husband about that place."

"And I'm going to find my daughter." The woman kicked off the rubber boots. She reached down and brushed her crushed feathers back into shape. The wings on her heels whirred. She arose into the air and sailed over the house.

Martha Conroy did not see her vanish. Long before she disappeared, Martha was stretched on the porch in a dead faint. Her fall was partially broken by the body of the maid, who had fainted a few moments before.

SAM CONROY was hot, dirty and tired. His pants legs were full of thorns and his temper was short. He stopped suddenly, as he and Jonas Dangerfield were tramping through a particularly stubborn thicket, and said, "Wait a minute. Why in heaven's name am I crawling around out here like a Chinese coolie after rice when I ought to be down in Wall Street looking after a million-dollar business?"

"It was a matter of a girl, remember?" Jonas Dangerfield said. "You were helping me find her." Dangerfield was scanning the woods with worried eyes.

"Well, that makes me crazier than you are. You may have a reason for hunting down this babe. But me—I—"

"You must have had a reason when you started out," Dangerfield said vaguely, but with definite meaning. "You were certainly enthusiastic enough when we started."

"I don't even know what she looks like."

The nudist colony mentor had his mind pointed mainly upon his own problems. He spoke without thinking. "I thought I told you. She is naked; she has wings on her heels, and horns on her head."

"Now—look here—if you think—"

They were finally approaching the stable, bedraggled and weary from a fruitless search. Dangerfield, a man of little stamina at best, was filled with discouragement. He said, "Oh, hell. What's the use of trying to cover it up? My nudist colony is merely a blind for an interplanetary railway. Well, not a railway, of course, but that's the accepted term. It isn't a spaceship line, either. The transportation principle encompasses phases of both time and space. You can't see it because it's guarded by a bent-light shield."

Sam Conroy had dropped a pace behind Dangerfield. His eyes were on the latter's profile. "Tell me more," Sam said softly.

"This girl we're hunting for is from another planet in another time phase. The phase is contingent on the phase in which Earth exists, but not that of the other planets of this family."

"Interesting. Go on."

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"That's why the girl is so much like *homo sapiens,* except for minor details —horns and wings."

"Sure—sure," Sam replied. "That's easy to follow. Like an eagle and a goat got married and—"

The stables were close now. Only a few more steps.

"No—you don't get the idea at all. The important thing is that—"

"That they get you to the funny house quick, brother!" Sam hit Dangerfield from behind. He hit the sunbathing enthusiast very hard and brought him down on his face. By the time Dangerfield got his senses back, Sam Conroy had a coil of rope off a nearby wall peg. He had the rope twisted thrice around Dangerfield's wrists, and—as Sam considered it—the homicidal possibilities of this maniac were well bottled up.

"What are you doing, man?" Dangerfield sputtered, as a mouthful of dirt spewed forth from his mouth. "What's wrong—have you gone mad?"

"A question like that from you? Cripes, what gall. I didn't know the risk I was taking. You could have knocked me off any time out there. I didn't know how lucky I was."

"Don't be a fool!" Dangerfield moaned. "Turn me loose. You don't know what you're doing!"

SAM SAT back and rested from his labors. "And you do, I suppose? Man! What a line! A naked babe with horns and wings on her heels—" Sam wiped his brow and squinted toward the lowering sun. "As a matter of fact, there's one flying over right now—" Sam lowered his contemptuous gaze at the helpless Dangerfield. "Right over the stables." Sam jerked like a man in the first spasm of epilepsy. His bulging eyes turned skyward as he did a double-take. "Oh, no!" he muttered. and the words were a fervent prayer.

"Over the stable, you say?" Dangerfield asked, twisting around for a quick look.

Sam's voice was dull, choked. He was like a man drowning on completely dry land. "Uh-huh. This one's got on a sombrero, though—and a winter overcoat. Is it the one we're looking for?"

Dangerfield groaned. "No. Now the fat's really in the fire! That's her mother!"

Sam Conroy did not reply. With the stunned expression of one slugged behind the ear but not yet gone unconscious, he picked up a stray end of the rope binding Dangerfield and began twisting it around his own wrists. "The doc told me the pace would get me," he babbled. "Told me ten years ago I couldn't stand the pressure." Tears welled into his eyes. "But I only wanted one more million. One more measly little million. Was that too much to ask?" He lowered his head between his knees and cried.

MARTHA CONROY opened her eyes and found that no one had come to pick her up. The maid was still out, so she had not been deprived of her pillow. There was a third person present, however. Whether he had just arrived, or whether he had been patiently waiting for her to wake up, Martha would never know.

She lay where she was, looking at the man with bright interest. He wore very little clothing, but that was a point of passing interest. There were other things about him so much more striking. He was, for instance, of a deep purple hue; startling, but pleasant withal. He was the possessor of four arms, two extending out from his hips which were no doubt of great value in picking things up from the floor without bending over. His knees were knobby and there was a wistful, frustrated look in the single eye he

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wore in the middle of his forehead.

At this moment, the maid came to. She suffered the swiftest relapse in history, however, as she passed out in the middle of a quick scream.

The purple creation said, "How do you do." He spoke in a polite voice—a cultured voice.

Martha smiled. Her mind was working in sections now. The predominating section thought, *Fiddle-dee-dee. Wonderland is such a beautiful place. How bright the comets.* Her tongue, with nothing to guide it but the training of genteel and loving parents, said, "I'm quite well, thank you. How are you?"

"I don't wish to startle you, but the situation is serious."

"I'm not in the least startled and it certainly is."

"To make you understand thoroughly, a great deal should be explained to you, but there is little time. I'll just say that I'm—well, in your world, I suppose you'd call me a railroad detective. I'm an employee of an inter-time-space line—"

"Imagine that," Martha said dreamily. "Do they pay well?"

"My name is Gorpho—" The purple entity stopped, the expression on his face no doubt the equivilent of a frown. He had had no experience on this planet before—in this particular time-continuum—but this female didn't seem to be responding correctly. Gorpho checked his supply of quick-charged knowledge, then decided he had no time for such things

"You see," he said, "earlier—on the standard of your time—a girl broke through the time shield at the depot and came out into your world. Her mother, quite upset, followed. Then it got to be some sort of mania. Quite a few different entity forms broke out also, something that never before happened. They must be rounded up... ah..."

"Mrs. Conroy," she said dreamily. "But you may call me Martha."

"Thank you—Martha. They must be rounded up. You can see the havoc it could cause."

Martha was remembering about a girl named Alice. The name was familiar, but she couldn't place it. Nor could she understand why, at this particular time, she should think of the name. It was all very bewildering.

The maid awakened, screamed, went to sleep again.

"Is she sick?" Gorpho inquired politely.

"The poor girl has had a trying day. You were saying—?"

"The *gorods*, from Continuum Four, are the ones we want to get back into the depot as soon as possible. They're the most intelligent entities in our whole time-range. Three of them came out before the guards were posted, and if it entered their minds to do so they could play jolly hell—I mean, they could disrupt your world no end."

"Oh, my! We certainly must get them back, mustn't we?"

"It's going to be difficult," the purple entity said gloomily. "They have amazing abilities."

"I'm sure we'll succeed, though, won't we?" Martha said, brightening somewhat as her remarkably pliant mind began to accept the new things so recently thrust upon her."

"I hope so. Perhaps I'll see you again."

"Do come to tea sometime."

The purple entity went away. Martha shook her head as one coming out of a dream. She flexed her mental muscles and found none of the tendons torn.

Then a pale blue ball rolled from behind a bush and said, "Good afternoon, Madam."

Martha blinked, but you can't beat breeding.

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She replied, "Good afternoon."

"He meant me."

"He did?"

"He should have told you I was round. Now you'll be shocked."

MARTHA SMILED gayly. "Oh, no, I won't. I don't shock easily, I can tell you!" After this reassurance, she added, "Aaaaagh," which was meaningless except as the last gargle of a game girl passing out from shock.

The *gorod* surveyed her relaxed form with a sympathy that would have been entirely unapparent to anyone save another *gorod*; then, filled with a sense of adventure at freedom in this amazing world, rolled off through the bushes in search of reinforcements. The *gorod*, which was a male—a fact which, also, would have been apparent only to another *gorod*—knew he could find a fellow entity peeking around the corner of what was called a stable, watching the strange antics of two entities native to this time and planet.

The male rolled in that direction, being careful to avoid being seen. This wasn't too difficult as only one person had to be reckoned with—a gardener busy with the flower beds in the back garden. The *gorod* solved the problem easily by sending the gardener into the kitchen for a glass of water.

Arriving at the corner of the stable, the male *gorod* said the equivilent of, "Hello."

The female replied, "Hello yourself. Having fun?"

"No end. What perks here?"

"Only a small part of what perks all over the place. The two characters sitting out there on the ground think they're crazy and are acting accordingly. At least one of them thinks that. The other doesn't seem to know what to think."

"Have you had a chance to read the three hiding in the stable?"

"There are only two, really. One is a Fourth Space female—the one who caused all the trouble. The other is the offspring of that fat male playing with the rope."

"I sense a third."

"Only an animal native to this world. Low mind quantuum. It's a male—thinking of something called oats. They call it a horse."

"Maybe the smartest of the whole bunch."

"There are a couple more down by the pond. A male and a female. Their names are Linda and Danny. An interesting situation between those two which I can't quite make out."

"How so?"

"Their problem. The male wants to mate. The female does too, but she's holding back."

"Why?"

"Because mating is a sin."

"A sin? Good Lord! I never heard of such a thing. Why doesn't the race die out?"

"My statement needs qualifying. The circumstances seem involved. They are allowed to mate only under certain circumstances."

"Oh, I see. One of them doesn't come up to standard."

"No, that isn't it. That rule applies only to the third entity in the stable. The horse. The horse can mate only with another thoroughbred, but these two-legged boss-entities can mate with morons if they want to."

THE MALE *gorod* achieved a gesture which would have been the shaking of his head in bewilderment—if he'd had a head. "If that's the case, I should think the horses would be the superior entities."

"Faulty thinking on your part."

"What difference does it make?

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Let's have some fun."

"Such as what?"

"Let's straighten some of these characters out."

"That's a good idea. There's a lot wrong with this picture."

"For instance, that fat character named Sam Conroy has far too much of stuff called money—the exchange medium."

The other *gorod* looked into Sam's mind and counted. The counting wasn't difficult because, sane or insane, Sam Conroy always kept the totals on the last balance sheet safely planted in his subconscious.

"Seven million—eight million. Say! You're right. Too much."

"And that young couple down there. All fouled up."

"And the pair inside with the horse. The male wants the Space Four female to—sit—on the horse while the horse jumps fences. How screwy can you get?"

"As nearly as I can figure, there's only one superior entity in the kit and kaboodle." The gorod stopped in sudden satisfaction. "Say—that's a nice phrase—*kit and kaboodle*. I wonder where I picked it up?"

"In the first place—it isn't a phrase. In the second place—the hell with it. Let's get going."

"Okay."

SAM CONROY untied the rope with which he'd fastened Dangerfield's wrists. Sam said, "Man—I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me. You're not crazy. I am. All my life I've rooted and dug to acquire money, while you went around exposing your bare a—your epidermis to the sun. That makes me the idiot. I can't take my money with me."

Jonas Dangerfield sat up cautiously, eyeing Sam. "I can't take my epidermis with me either, for that matter. So what have you proved?"

"That I'm a selfish heel. Do you want some money, Dangerfield?"

"Who doesn't?"

"I'm going to give you some. I'm going to give you a million dollars. More than that. Two million."

"How many have you got?" Dangerfield asked.

"Me? Oh hell. Seven—eight—ten. I quit counting years ago. The stuff piles up, kind of."

Dangerfield had the rope in his hands. He had come up on his heels. Now he lunged forward and knocked Sam Conroy flat on his face. As Sam belched out an indignant cloud of dust, Jonas Dangerfield tied the millionaire's wrists securely behind his back.

Sam gargled, "Hey! What the hell?"

Jonas sat back and wiped his brow. "Brother," he said. "You've really had it! I can almost hear the marbles rolling around in your head. Mad as fourteen hatters."

"Well, that was certainly a big success," the female *gorod* observed. "Except for a slight variation of the rope trick, those two are exactly where they were before."

"You figure it's my fault? I don't agree. How can you get anywhere when you've got nothing to work with?"

"One of the first rules is to know your material."

"I guess you're right. But it's amazing how the basic stuff can get twisted around."

"Oh-oh! Cops! That four-armed Seventh Spacer on round-up detail. Let's get out of here."

"You said it. Roll, brother, roll."

LINDA CONROY reached out quickly and took Danny's hand. "Darling! I've got it!"

They were seated on a large boul-

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der by the artificial lake which had cost Sam Conroy a fat forty-thousand dollars. Danny turned questioning eyes on the girl he hankered after.

"It amounts to this," Linda said. "We want each other very badly. But, being young moderns, we don't want to make a mistake. Marriage is a serious business. Maybe it's just infatuation. It would be tragic if we found out afterward that we weren't suited to each other."

"That's right. But we'd sure have a lot of fun finding out." Danny moved restlessly. He picked up a rock and shied it over a line of bushes.

Beyond the bushes, a male *gorod* jumped. "Ouch. Watch yourself!"

Danny looked quickly at Linda. "What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything."

"You said 'ouch'."

"Why should I say 'ouch'. I don't hurt."

"Guess it must be my nerves."

"But I was telling you—I have the answer. The nudist camp."

"The nudist camp! Those screwy—!"

"So they're screwy. But we won't be. We'll go there for a purpose. A scientific purpose, really."

"I don't get it."

"Look—in a nudist camp things are —well, pretty elemental. We'll at least get on speaking terms—or seeing terms—with the things that—that are causing all the trouble. A great man once said, 'Know thyself'—"

"What great man?"

"How do I know. Anyhow—what does it matter? The point is, if we sort of back into this thing—sort of—"

Danny scowled with gloom. "If we went into a nudist camp, I think I'd be backing up all the time."

"Stop bringing up side issues. If we went into the thing gradually. If we got really acquainted with each other on an elemental basis, we might arrive at our conclusions without making any mistakes in either direction."

Danny was unconvinced. "I think the prime mistake would be straight in the direction of a nudist camp." He turned on her suddenly. "Linda! Let's just forget the whole thing and get married! Other people do it. It can't be so bad."

Linda drew back primly. "Finding out things in advance was your idea, not mine. Being very persuasive, you convinced me—"

"I wasn't persuasive enough to convince you we should just—"

"Never mind about that. I think we should join the nudist camp immediately. Who can tell? In a couple of weeks we might become thoroughly disillusioned with each other."

"Wouldn't that be wonderful?" Danny said with exaggerated inflection. "Women! Wouldn't it be swell if a man could get along without them?"

"You're taking the wrong attitude," Linda said. "Let's hurry."

"I don't see how they ever get anything done on this planet," the male *gorod* said. "They fuss around so much. They talk and talk. How do these Earthlings ever get born?"

"It *is* a puzzle, but I'm really enjoying myself. Educational—that's the term for it. We'll be the better for it when we get back."

"I don't know about that. Aside from a female I found resting with another female out front of the house, I'd say they're all a bunch of wacks. That one had culture and brains."

"After looking the deal over," the other said, "I think I'd take the horse."

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THE GIRL at the reception desk at the nudist camp, oddly enough, wore a brassiere. She smiled in a friendly manner and asked, "What can I do for you?"

Danny said, "We'd—we'd like to join up."

"I see. And we're delighted to welcome you. Won't you sit down?"

Linda and Danny sat down, and the girl said, "There are a few questions I must ask first. Question One—what are your reasons for wanting to join up?"

Linda gulped: "Must—must we have reasons?"

"Of course."

"Ah—maybe you could help us," Danny said. "What are some of the reasons you don't let people in? If you'd tell us, we could . . ah . . . answer more intelligently."

The girl smiled. "Well, many people come here to just—look at each other, to put it bluntly.

"That's not allowed?" There was a definite tone of hope in Danny's voice.

"Of course it's allowed. But we must know they are all right. Both mentally and morally."

"You mean—only the right people are allowed to look at right—other people?"

"After a manner of speaking."

"Well, we're okay morally. As to the mentality angle—I'm not so sure."

"Danny!" Linda said sharply. She turned to the girl. "He's just upset—unsettled. We feel this experience will do us both good as a means of straightening out a few—personal problems. The problems have to do with compatibility, marriage, and several other things. It would take too long to explain."

"I'll bet this place makes a lot of bachelors," Danny said miserably.

Up to this point, the reception girl had been treating Linda and Danny in a pleasant, but impersonal, manner. But now—at a moment which coincided with a pair of gorods ducking behind some bushes near the door in order to avoid being seen by a fat, fiftyish, unbeautiful nude who followed his paunch around the corner—the girl put an eye on Danny; an eye alight, suddenly, with a light far from impersonal.

The eye help upon him for quite a while, as though the girl were suddenly learning things one couldn't learn through mere nudity.

"I think you're nice," she said, almost musingly.

Linda blinked.

The girl ignored the blink—probably did not even see it. Her hand came up with a movement suggesting the same musing attitude as had been revealed by her tone,—and reached back to unhook the brassiere she was wearing. It dropped away and the girl stood up behind the desk at which she had been seated. The effect was rather breathtaking. It took Danny's breath.

The girl walked around the desk, stopped, dropped the brassiere, and said, "I don't have to wear that. I just do it to keep new arrivals from blushing."

Danny's throat bobbed as though some words were locked in a death struggle inside.

THE GIRL walked up to him and put her hand under his chin, raising the chin and gazing into Danny's eyes. "Yes, you're nice. I think you're very very nice, I'll see that you have no trouble at all in getting into the camp."

Linda, recovering from her shock, bleated, "Now wait a minute. Maybe we don't want to—"

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Danny looked at her. A certain firmness developed in the chin the girl had been fondling. "It was your idea—remember. So we're not going to be quitters. We're not going to be wishy-washy. My father taught me that when one makes up one's mind to do a thing, one must do it."

"I'll bet your father would change his views if he got a look at this place."

"We're staying," Danny said. "At least, I am."

"Well, if you think I'm going away and leave you in the clutches of this hussy—"

The reception girl was obviously in the clutches of some deep new emotion. "What did you say, pet?"

"I'm not your pet. I'm—I said *hussy*."

"Oh, I'm sure you're nothing of the kind." The girl reached down and took Danny's hand, urging him to his feet. "You go this way, darl—you come this way. I'll show you."

She led Danny toward a door on the left. She opened the door and gently pushed Danny through.

Linda wailed, "Wait a minute. Where do I go?"

The girl turned and looked at Linda as though she wondered where the latter had sprung from. "Oh—you take that door, pet. You'll probably find someone in there to help you."

Still stunned, Linda walked toward the indicated door. Not recovering to any great extent, she went through certain motions synonymous to nudist colonies as indicated by certain attendants, and emerged in a very short time, through another door, wearing a beautifully bronzed skin and nothing else.

She found herself inside an enclosure; one that could be looked into only by a man in a high window using a pair of powerful field glasses. Other people passed Linda in the same state of complete undress as herself. Many eyes turned appreciatively in her direction. But Linda had had appreciative eyes turned in her direction all her life. She scarcely noticed it.

What she did notice, however, was Danny coming through another door with the reception girl—who had evidently walked away from her job without a backward glance—clinging to his arm.

Linda certainly did notice the myriad of appreciative eyes turned in Danny's direction—feminine eyes. Whether or not that was what brought her out of her daze, will never be known—but she came out of it with a whoop that would have done justice to a Comanche Indian. She turned into a brown streak as she dived for the love-struck girl on Danny's arm.

And her manner changed completely. The veneer of a Gold Coast background vanished completely—was shucked off like the undies she had discarded inside, leaving gorgeous brown skin and gorgeous, gutter-born fury.

"Lemme at 'er! Lemme at 'er!" Linda screamed as she charged down upon the surprised girl.

LINDA SWARMED over her new rival like a summer squall over an unsuspecting hill. Danny was brushed aside and the two girls went down into the dust in a wild tangle of straining arms and legs.

Linda got her two hands securely entangled in a head of hair. At the same time, her own hair was similarly taken in hand.

"Want to make a little bet on the outcome?" the male *gorod* asked.

Coming partially into view, the female *gorod* said, "A bet? I don't un-

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derstand you. What's that?"

"It's something they do on this planet. Make different guesses on what's going to happen in such cases as this."

"No. I think it's disgusting."

The fight had developed into a screaming contest coupled with the mutual efforts of both girls to lift each other off the ground by four handfuls of hair. The feat was obviously impossible. Linda realized this first. She disengaged one of them, doubled it into a fist, and hung a competent right on her opponent's chin. The girl went down, but refused to let go of Linda's hair, so the latter, in a rather novel manner, succeeded in knocking herself down.

Danny, had been standing by, completely frozen. Now he thawed a trifle and took a step forward. Other nudists had unbent more swiftly, however, and were in the act of separating the two battlers.

Linda, glowering at all and sundry, went through the instinctive motions of straightening her dress, pulling down her girdle, and even straightening her hose, before she realized she was wearing none of these garments. She turned her eyes on Danny—eyes that blazed. "Go in and put on your clothes, stupid. You look like 'September Morn' with parts missing!"

"But—but—I don't get it! What was all the fuss about?"

"You're not expected to get it, lamebrain. But get this: we're hiking out of this cheap, shoddy, immoral place. We're going to put our clothes on and go back and mingle with decent people! We're going to get a marriage license and do things right! If you find out things about me after that and don't like them, you're just hooked, brother, and don't forget it."

She took Danny by the arm and began hauling him in the direction of his pants. "And if I ever hear of you taking off your clothes again, I'll—"

"Now wait a minute! That's a tall order. A man can get awful dirty if he never takes off—"

"You know what I mean. There's a time and place for everything and this is neither the time nor the place."

Danny grinned as he allowed himself to be hauled along. He whispered, "I'm willing, honey. Baby! Are you stacked! I never dreamed—"

"Don't be vulgar," Linda said. And they disappeared inside the building—much to the regret of the other nudists.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" the female gorod *said*.

"Uh-huh. I mean, I did some good. I've got those kids straightened out."

"And you had a wonderful time doing it. A disgustingly wonderful time."

"The end justifies the method," the male *gorod* said cheerfully. "Now, don't tell me you didn't enjoy it."

"It was vulgar, bestial, degrading, immoral . . ." The female *gorod* giggled. "It was—fun."

"That's better. Oh-oh. Here he comes."

"Where? Oh. That cop!"

"Let's beat it."

MARTHA CONROY came back to consciousness with an inherent courage and a steadfast faith in life in general. A person of little faith would have had the mental guards up by this time, but not Martha. A creature of naturally sunny disposition, she believed, without knowing why, in the bounty of life, and she was sure everything was going to be all right.

She awakened the maid, who instinctively threw up both hands to ward off whatever might come—an indication of her difference in character. But nothing came. There were no monsters in sight. Only the serene

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landscape of a summer day. The whispering trees, the homey little twenty-room hutch that had cost Sam Conroy two-hundred-thousand dollars.

"Maybe—maybe we dreamed it," the maid said doubtfully.

"I'm sure we did," Martha said cheerfully. "And it's certainly undignified of us to be seen sprawled out here. People might think we drink."

They got to their feet, the maid still looking around apprehensively. "He had four arms," she marveled. "He was purple."

"You know—I got the same impression myself. Isn't it amazing how two people can have exactly the same hallucination at the same time?"

"It certainly is, Madam. Maybe it was something we ate."

"Speaking of food, it's the cook's day off. Do you feel up to handling it as usual?"

The maid nodded, but looked doubtful. Martha smiled and patted her arm. "I'll help you, child. Before Sam got rich I was a very good cook—really I was."

"If—if you'll just walk to the kitchen with me," the maid said gratefully. "For some reason, I don't want to be alone."

"We'll just go out and cook a nice little supper. We'll make them proud of us." Martha took the maid's hand and they went inside. They walked through the big house to the shining kitchen.

"It's very beautiful, isn't it?" Martha said. Her surprise was natural. She hadn't been in the kitchen for over eleven years, and on that occasion, only briefly, when she lost her way to the rear patio and had to be redirected by the cook.

"We'll fry some eggs," Martha said. "I'm sure Sam will love them. I used to fry eggs very well. I wonder where they are kept?"

"In the ice-box, Madam."

"Oh, of course."

In an effort to be helpful, the maid opened the refrigerator door. She didn't even bother to scream this time. With a certain show of weariness, she lay down and went to sleep on the kitchen floor.

Martha stepped over her and the creature in the refrigerator said, "Hello."

"Hello."

"Hot, isn't it?"

"Oh, no. As a matter of fact I thought it a rather nice day."

"Very hot, but it's almost comfortable in here."

Martha gazed in a certain fascination at the little entity. It was varicolored, looking as though an artist had used its skin as a testing ground for bright colors. It was about two feet high, had an ugly, though somehow amiable, face, two absured little legs, and wore a sort of peaked dunce cap. It said, "I had a hard time getting the door closed after me, but I managed it. Smart of me, wasn't it?"

THE CREATURE, Martha noted, was extremely egotistical. It spoke as though climbing into a refrigerator, and closing the door after one's self, were a difficult feat. Martha thought of this for a moment, after which it occurred to her that the creature was right. Such a thing *was* difficult. "How did you manage it?" she asked.

The creature smirked. "Oh, there are ways. I'm just clever."

"Ah...ah, may I ask who—what you are?"

"Eh? Why a *gingoid,* of course—just like you."

"But I'm not a *gin*—a *goid.*"

"Then what are you?"

"Why I'm a—a human being—I guess."

"You guess? Do you mean to tell

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me you don't know what you are?"

Martha set her lips firmly. "Of course I do. I'm a human being."

"I never heard of one." The *gingoid* eyed Martha with interest and speculation. "I never saw one before either. What do you do?"

"I—why, I make a home for my husband. I raise my family."

"That sounds dull. A—by the way, would you mind?"

"Mind what?"

"Closing the door. It's getting rather warm in here. In my country, the temperature in here even with the door closed would be considered a heat wave."

"Close it? Oh, certainly. I'm sorry."

"That's quite all right. I like you. You're very nice."

"Thank you."

Martha closed the refrigerator, turned, and stumbled over the prone body of the maid. Martha smiled and kneeled down. The maid's eyes flickered, opened. Martha said, "Poor dear. You've had a hard day—a very hard day. Would you like to lie down and rest?"

The maid struggled to her feet. Her manner and mood had changed. "Madam! Rest?" she snapped. "That's all I've been doing. I feel that I've gotten a good night's sleep in the last three hours. I'm quitting, Madam. I have only one ambition—to get to the station and away from this madman's zoo in one piece. There is nothing personal. Please understand that. I like you very much, Madam. I just want to get the hell out of here."

Martha gasped. "My dear. Such language! One conducts one's self as a lady at all times."

"On the contrary," the maid said grimly. "One merely tries to keep a grip on one's sanity. In this situation, that's quite enough. Goodbye, Madam, and don't think I haven't enjoyed it."

The maid tottered from the room, and Martha somehow got the impression that she'd aged. That was foolish, however. A young girl did not age in a few short hours—or did she?

Martha sighed and reopened the refrigerator door. "I'm sorry. I forgot the eggs. Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

"Thank you." Martha took out a carton of eggs. Closing the door, she crossed over and put them by the stove. She returned and reopened the refrigerator door. "Would you care for a fried egg? I'd be glad to—"

Martha's clear, well-enunciated words slurred off into an undignified mumble. The reason for this was that, now, there were two *gingoids* in the refrigerator.

Martha said, "I—I don't understand—"

"Don't understand what?"

"There was one of—just you—I don't know which one—but now there are a pair of you, and—"

"Do you mind?"

"Not at all—I guess—except that if it goes on—"

"It won't. There were two of us all the time," one of the *gingoids* said. "Zork just—well—sort of left the room for a minute, I suppose you'd call it."

"But how—?"

The *gingoid* bristled. "Well, after all—aren't we entitled to as much privacy as the next person? We have a certain modesty, also."

"But how did—?"

The *gingoid* yawned. "You wouldn't understand, I'm afraid. Will you please close the door?"

Martha sighed, closed the door, and went back to her eggs.

SAM CONROY sat in the harness room on a tack box next to Jonas Dangerfield. His brow was wrinkled in

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thought. He said, "But isn't there any way of getting a financial statement from these transportation companies? If they do the business you say, they must need money. They must have to float loans. How does a man get in on the gravy? I mean—"

"I know what you mean," Jonas Dangerfield said. "But you just don't grasp it."

Sam bristled. "I know you can't build railroads without money!"

"But these aren't railroads."

"A technicality. Air-lines then. Space lines. They all take money. Now, I've got three-four million in liquid assets I can—"

"A technicality. Airlines then. Space transportation principle operates on a vibrational plane several million cycles higher and faster than—"

Sam shrugged. "So they go faster."

"As a matter of fact, they don't even move. You don't understand. The vibratory plane I'm talking about is much higher than the one we live on. The higher you go in the series, the easier it is to function. The space-time transportation systems would have no use for the kind of money you own."

Sam scowled. "What's wrong with my money? I got it honest. I've been —well, ethical." Sam thought it over a moment and decided that was the truth. "Yes—ethical. And I'd like to invest."

Dangerfield was sitting on his right. He brushed his left arm impatiently with his right hand and said, "Go away. We're busy."

Dangerfield looked and said, "Good lord! They must have torn a real hole in that shield. A *protarp*."

Sam looked inquiringly. "What the hell's a *protarp?*"

"That." Jonas pointed. "A Twelfth Spacer."

Sam whirled, muttered, "What the hell!" and made a clean ten-foot leap away from there.

The entity was rather formless, but did not remain that way. Faced with the necessity of jumping down from the box, it grew a small pair of legs and jumped. Once on the floor, with the necessity of legs momentarily remote, the legs vanished and there appeared, in their place, a comfortable growth resembling a chair upon which the entity sat taking its ease. The face when it had tapped Sam on the shoulder had been ugly but politely inquiring. Now, in need of a new expression, that face disappeared, to be replaced by one with a different expression. Sad, dejected, frankly melancholy.

The entity said, "Please. I'd like to go home now."

"Well, what the hell's stopping you? Go on. Scat." Sam Conroy punctuated his words with appropriate gestures.

The *protarp's* second face disappeared, to be replaced with a new one from which tears ran from sad eyes. "You're very cruel. Also, impolite. Also, extremely antisocial, not to mention hopelessly vulgar."

SAM TURNED to Jonas. "Look! I've had about all I can stand of these nightmares popping out of nowhere."

The *protarp's* new face registered indignation. "Look what nightmare is calling who a nightmare? Where I come from, you'd give children screaming fits."

Jonas Dangerfield eyed the protarp moodily. "How'd you get out?"

The *protarp* saw no reason to change its face. "You speak as though I'd been in prison or something. I'm a responsible citizen who merely bought a ticket, in good faith, to go from one range to another. Since that time I've been pushed about, insulted, and made generally unhappy. Even a simple request such

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as the way to go home gets only churlish answers. I warn you, I shall sue your company."

"Not my company," Jonas said wearily. "I was fired hours ago. That's for sure. Things have gone to hell in a hand basket and they've taken me with them."

"That's very interesting," the *protarp* said—having changed to a face with a sad expression—"but I wonder if you'd tell me the way home?"

Sam Conroy bit down savagely on the end of a soggy cigar. "It's simple. You just walk to a location that doesn't exist—find a place that's invisible, and climb back into it. That's the depot."

"I'm afraid you're making sport of me," the *protarp* said. "I shall try to find the depot myself."

"Swell," Sam said. "So long."

The *protarp* grew a pair of legs and walked out of the barn with a queer dignity entirely its own. And the more incongruous, because it had made the mistake of growing the legs with the knee-joints in reverse, so it presented the appearance of a person walking backwards.

Scarcely had the little entity left the premises when there was a snort, and a horse appeared at the far end of the room. There were two people astride the animal. A young man and a very beautiful girl wearing two handkerchiefs and a pair of wings on her heels.

The young man said, "Hello, Dad. Congratulate us. We're married."

"Huh? Married? Now wait a minute."

Nick Conroy jumped down and lifted his bride from Star King's back. Plura could have got down more easily all by herself. But with the true instincts of a woman, she demurely allowed her husband to do the work.

Nick Conroy grinned. "Don't look so flabbergasted, Dad. Everything's all right. All legal and decent. We went into another time zone."

"Talk sense."

"I am. Let's go back a ways and I'll brief you. When I met Plura I was only interested in Star King winning a steeplechase—"

"I can see where this is going to get complicated," Sam said gloomily.

"Not at all. I knew Star King could win if Plura rode him, but there was the problem of her horns."

"She hasn't got any horns," Jonas said.

"She did have. And as you know, there is only one way a Space Four female can lose her horns. When she's ready to—"

Plura was not the same girl she had been. Now she blushed—something of which she would have been incapable in the old days.

"I know," Jonas said.

"I don't," Sam growled.

"Well, a Space Four loses her horns when she is ready to propagate—"

SAM SPRANG to his feet. "You mean you took advantage of this girl just to win a lousy horse race?" He turned to Plura. "And you let him?"

"My mother taught me to be accommodating—always," Plura said demurely.

"That's all very fine—but there's a limit!"

"Not where Plura comes from," Nick said. "But people are different there." He himself was a trifle shamefaced now, but it passed quickly. "Anyhow, we went into another time-zone and got married. As time is reckoned there, we've been away a year, even though it's only an afternoon." Nick gazed lovingly at his wife. "As a matter of fact, Plura's horns are

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growing in again. You're a grandfather, Dad."

Sam Conroy was past the stage of any surprise whatever. "What about the horse race?"

"Oh, I've forgotten that long ago. I've got a nice business started, already, in Space Four. We can't stay long. I've got to get back."

Jonas Dangerfield was on his feet. "You mean the lines are running?"

"Of course. An official named Gorpho and a couple of *gorods* straightened everything out. It seemed that the shield in the old station was faulty. A new one was necessary—a depot, I mean, so the *gorods* talked Mother into leasing our living room to the line—" Nick turned to his father. "—or rather, your living room."

"Wait a minute," Sam exploded. "That isn't legal. I'll stop it. It's absurd. Martha's crazy."

"She made a good deal. Ten *jorgs* a year—our time—that is, your time."

"Ten dollars? The dirty—"

"No, that's equivalent to about a million dollars, U. S. currency. And it can be transposed easily.

Sam blinked. "Martha always was a smart woman.

"And," Nick continued, "you won't know the depot's there, of course. As a matter of fact, there will be ten depots—one inside the other—on the same spot."

"Then we should get more money," Sam said.

"I think it's plenty, Dad," Nick said sternly.

Jonas' eyes were trained on Plura's top handkerchief. She smiled at him. He smiled back. "How's your mother?" he asked politely.

"Oh, she's fine. We came and got her several hours ago, Earth time, and now she's home taking care of the baby."

"We want to run over and see Mom," Nick said. "Excuse us?"

"I don't know about that," Sam said frowning. "It might not be a good idea. Your mother don't know about any of this. The shock might be more than she could stand."

"Yes," Nick agreed. "Mother always was frail. A great shock..."

The cheerful, lilting voice of Martha Conroy preceded her body into the room. She appeared beside Star King and said, "Hello, darlings. I've had such a wonderful time." She saw Nick and Plura then, and her smile deepened. "Oh, there you are. I went to see you at your new home and didn't find you. I went, mainly, to see my granddaughter. You were naughty to keep your marriage from us so long."

Sam's eyes were bulging. "Good Lord, woman! It's only one o'clock!"

"Not by their time, darling."

"How did you find out..."

"That nice railroad detective. He came back and I gave him some scrambled eggs and he was very appreciative. He got the details from someone who talked to Plura's mother and then the *gorods* came and the new depot opened, so they gave me a free ride to that other time zone and—" Martha's eyes rested fondly on Plura. "The baby is adorable. And your mother said if I saw you to ask you to hurry home. It's been several weeks now, and she has to go home to your father. On the basis of his time, she's been away eleven years and she's afraid he'll forget about her."

"Yes," Plura said, "we'll have to hurry along."

"Will you visit us?" Nick asked.

Martha laughed. "We'll be delighted. I'll have to explain all this to Sam." She looked at him fondly. "All this will be a great shock to him."

THE END

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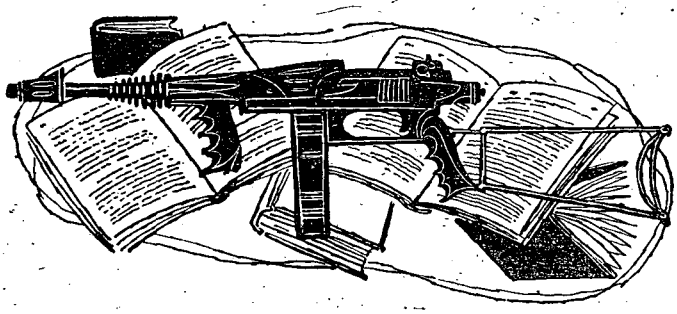

IN A DAY OF VICTORY

By Irving E. Cox, Jr.

In the New World, the suspicious survived while the innocent perished. But there were still those willing to say, "This dream is worth dying for"

I'M ONLY a Corporal of the National Science Research Guard; I'm not supposed to know anything about science. All I'm expected to do is check the Blue Cards and write down the names of the talk-tapes they use in the N.S.R. Library. Mabel tells me now that I should have been suspicious of this Dr. Brascomb from the start, on account of his looks. That's a woman for you! I was, you see, but when I told Mabel about it, she laughed at me.

If she had taken it seriously, we could have saved the world.

But she said, "Now you listen to me, Mike. You're new on that job. Don't start getting funny ideas. If the scientists get Blue Cards from us, you can bet on it they're O.K. When the S.C. needs your advice, we'll ask for it."

Mabel is a Steno First Class in the Security Corps, and she's mighty proud of it. But if you ask me, the N.S.R. Library is more important than all the other Alliance agencies put together; because the Alliance scientists come here to do research in the talk-tapes of the old books. If it weren't for the library, the Alliance would have been defeated a century ago.

Books are ideas. You can't let just anybody fool around with them. Mabel says the enemy is terribly careless with his stuff. They've actually filmed their books and scattered copies among all their underground colleges; even the school kids

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They didn't worry about the mint—they guarded the library

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and the workers are encouraged to read them, with no kind of check-up.

The Alliance was foolish enough to do that, too, a hundred years ago, before the Popular Emergency Government was organized.

The first thing the P.E.G. did was classify the whole population of the Alliance for specializations. We were able to weed out most of our subversive opposition at the same time, although a few odd-balls still turn up now and then. When the P.E.G psychiatrists analyzed the causes of obstructionism, the evidence pointed overwhelmingly to the indiscriminate use of books. As a consequence, the N.S.R. Library was organized. All talk-tapes were brought here from every library in the Alliance, and surplus copies were destroyed.

Our town was built to house the library and the research laboratories. It has no name and it appears on none of the maps. From the air we present nothing more bomb-worthy than a village crossroads. If an enemy air cruiser should happen to approach us, it would be disintegrated in the air, for the town is completely encircled by ray batteries.

Every three months the N.S.R. Guard rotates assignments. At the last change, I was posted to the library.

The talk-tapes are kept in sealed, air-conditioned, underground vaults, nine levels in depth, which radiate like gigantic wheel spokes from a central reading room built to accommodate as many as five hundred readers at one time, although we seldom have more than twenty. There is one entrance to the reading room, a narrow, metal-walled passageway which runs past a small desk, where I was stationed.

IN ORDER to take a talk-tape from the shelves, the reader hands me a piece of paper with the call number written on it. I write the number by his name on the check list that I keep on my desk. I then dial the number on a control panel. In less than twenty seconds the tiny tape box is mechanically pulled from its shelf, slid into a pneumatic tube, and deposited on a table in the reading room, beside a reading machine. The boxes are returned in the same way; thus, no human being ever enters the stacks.

Among the other scientists who used the library, Dr. Brascomb stuck out like an energized enemy guard post. Everything about him shouted crackpot. His suit was blue, like all the others, but so well pressed it looked new. Once he wore a shirt that was a pastel pink; another was a pale blue. Obviously he had the vanity to die the material himself, since colored cloth was banned four generations ago. Brascomb's hair was clipped very short and carefully combed. His shoes were not only new, but polished as slick as the mount of a new ray gun.

There was nothing tangibly wrong, but believe me I double-checked his credentials. I got the S.C. on the intercom and asked if they had actually issued a Blue Card to Albert Brascomb. It was my luck that Mabel's face came into focus on the view screen.

"Of course Brascomb has a Blue Card," she told me, looking very bored. "He's had it ever since he got back."

"Back? From where?"

"If you read your P.E.G. bulletin the way you're supposed to, Mike, you'd know. For seven years Dr. Brascomb has been teaching at the Technical Academy. The government gave him the Bar Award for his services. He was so anxious to get back

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to his work on weapons, he didn't even take a resort leave."

"What's his line, Mabel?"

"Brascomb's just our top physicist, that's all." She sounded very sarcastic. "I do wish you'd try to keep up with some of the news, Mike."

"What's he working on now?"

"Are you asking officially, Mike?"

I hesitated for a moment, but, after all, I am allowed to make one complaint-inquiry without evidence, so I said, "Official, Mabel."

Her voice turned crisp and emotionless. "The S.C. is informed and has issued blanket approval; you have no concern with specific details. Now you listen to me, Mike. You're new on that job. Don't start getting funny ideas. If the scientists get Blue Cards from us, you can bet on it they're O.K. When the S.C. needs your advice, we'll ask for it."

I had gone through the proper channels, and this was the official reply of the Security Corps. Without actual evidence, I could not reopen the matter. I should have been satisfied; but I wasn't.

ON THE SECOND day Brascomb was in the library he came to withdraw a new talk-tape. While he wrote out the card, I asked,

"Are you working on a defensive or an offensive weapon, Doctor?"

"As a matter of fact," he answered blandly, "neither one."

"Oh." It was my impression that the library was never used for any other type of research. Theoretically, there's no reason why it shouldn't be, since in the vaults we have talk-tapes of all books ever written. But in a practical sense, the century-long emergency has limited our trained scholars to those in the field of applied science.

"When I began my research," he went on, "I was interested in the development of a new use for our atomic power—that is, for space travel."

"To another planet, sir?" I asked. "But that's impossible."

"You've had some training in science, I take it?"

"Oh, no; but I understand the facts."

Brascomb laughed—and it was a very nasty laugh. "I would dearly love to know your sources, Corporal."

"The P.E.G. itself. When I was stationed in Sector 14 on the Front, we began to hear rumors about a space ship the enemy was building. That meant they could establish a permanent satellite in space and destroy us with weapons we couldn't touch! The P.E.G. issued a bulletin explaining that the rumor was a clever lie put out by enemy subversives."

"But how does that make space travel impossible?"

"Oh, the bulletin explained about that, too." I hesitated a little, for I knew I was in over my head, talking science to a physicist of Brascomb's reputation. Yet it was safe to quote a government bulletin; it was authoritative and he had no right to question it. "For a space ship to be able to escape our pull of gravity, it would have to attain a certain very high speed. We've demonstrated with out weather rockets that any metal object going that fast would burn and explode because of friction."

"It would be wicked of me to ask you what friction is," he said, "but don't place too much confidence in it. The creation of the metal is merely a problem of technique, when you have the power. We have that, of course, in the control of energy used in the ray-machines."

"Oh, no, Dr. Brascomb. The ray

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simply disintegrates matter." I had seen it work on the battlefield and I knew what I was talking about. "There's no push to it, nothing like the kind of force you'd need to move a machine through space."

"Corporal, the disintegrator is an exactly controlled stream of matter—or energy, if you prefer—so thin it can pass through the atmosphere without disturbing it, but not through a more concentrated substance. If the force issuing from the machine were more concentrated, it would push against the air as a rocket does, but with a vastly stronger force." He gave me his call card. "These are the tapes I want."

I noted the numbers on my check list and began to set the dials. "They must be very rare, Dr. Brascomb. No one else has asked for numbers like these."

"Rare indeed, my friend; tapes of a forgotten science called history." This seemed to amuse him a great deal; he was still chuckling when he went to get his tapes at a reading table.

AFTER THE morning and afternoon rush to check out talk-tapes is over, I am expected to take a turn around the reading room to make sure the material is being properly used. I was fascinated by the curious notes Brascomb seemed to be making. On a large sheet of paper he had drawn a perfect circle, and through the center of it a line. At one point where the line and circle met he had set down a tiny arrow. The rest of the sheet was covered with scrawled columns of numbers and formulae.

"Are you interested in mechanics?" he asked.

"Don't know a thing about it; but you've made a pretty drawing."

"I'm trying to check the mathematics of an idea I picked up from an old talk-tape."

"A new weapon?"

He laughed. "You could call it that. It came from Archimedes."

"Archimedes? Never heard of him."

"I imagined you hadn't. Once he said, 'Give me a lever long enough, and a fulcrum strong enough, and single-handed I can move the world.'" Brascomb smiled ingenuously. "Confusing, isn't it? Like your tale about friction. It doesn't make sense unless you know what the words mean. And I don't really believe the Popular Emergency Government intends to define lever or fulcrum outside the Technical Academy. You will forgive me if I don't explain; I wouldn't want you to take me for an obstructionist."

Two afternoons after that, Dr. Brascomb sauntered toward my desk, smiling languidly over the cigarette drooping from his lips.

"You're a Front-Vet, aren't you, Corporal?"

"Two years in Sector 8, five in Sector 14," I told him. "I was assigned to the Ground Corps at fifteen—you know, when the Alliance Placement Tests are given in school."

"The good old weeding-out process. That's when I was transferred to the Technical Academy."

"Each of us serves where he is fitted to serve best," I reminded him, quoting the familiar slogan.

"Indeed, yes. I had an Int. of 186, an M/T of 300, and I think I broke the bank in manipulative skills. Naturally they made me a physicist. Now I have to come to you, hat in hand, for the answer to a simple question. Corporal, what's the enemy like?"

"Are you trying to imply, Dr. Brascomb—"

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"Spare me the dramatics, please. You know what I mean. You've seen the enemy on the battlefield, in the hospitals, perhaps in a prison camp. What does he look like? How does he think? Is he as—" Brascomb paused, glaring hard at me with his cold blue eyes. "Is he as fanatic as we are?"

"I've seen very few of them, and that was years ago."

"But you've served at the Front! You must have had some sort of personal contact—"

"The Front has been stabilized in every sector for decades. We have our electronic automatics for defense; they have theirs. We can't break through their lines any more than they can through ours. It's years since we've taken a prisoner."

"The casualties are light, too, then?"

"Except when we're mounting an attack. Actually, the fighting is pretty dull most of the time. We sit in our shelters buried so far underground we can't even hear the explosions. We hurl radio-controlled shells and gasses and dusts at the enemy; most of them are dissipated harmlessly in the air by their defense batteries of ray machines."

"What about the air force?"

"We use it sometimes, but there aren't any real targets nowadays. The cities were gutted a century ago, right after the emergency started. The enemy has built underground, just as we have, and his camouflage is as good as ours."

"What it comes down to, then, is this: the Ground Forces on both sides are buried in the earth, manipulating radio controls that throw useless gadgets at an impregnible foe."

"The enemy's in the same fix."

"Most of our men could come home, and it would make no difference."

"Dr. Brascomb! If the enemy thought even one of our sectors was undermanned—"

"But how would he find out?" His handsome face glittered with excitement. In a tense whisper he demanded, "How can we be sure, Corporal, that the enemy hasn't done precisely that?" Slowly he walked back to his reading table, nursing his chin with his long, delicate hands.

THAT WAS the night I always took Mabel to the Center. Once a month the Peoples Recreation Room is set aside for the entertainment of the non-commissioned officers of both the S.C. and the N.S.R. Guard. We are permitted to buy any drink we want and order any meal on the menu. The Room even puts on the regular floor show for us, exactly the same one that the S.C. officers and the three-year scientists can see on the other nights of the month.

Mabel likes her liquor. It makes her very mellow and very friendly and very—but I'm straying from the point. That evening, when I judged she was in a mood to take it right, I told her about Brascomb again.

"Maybe there is something to it, Mike," she admitted. "But, Dr. Brascomb! It seems impossible to question his loyalty. He's a legend to everyone in the Alliance. His name stands for safety and victory. Every school child knows it. Only a conscientious fool like yourself—why, do you realize, Mike, Dr. Brascomb is the inventor of the ray machine!"

"You must be wrong, Mabel. We've had that for fifty years."

"Fifty-three."

"But Brascomb's a young man!"

"Young? Mike, this could be terribly serious; I've been a fool about

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it." She never would have admitted it, if she hadn't been a little drunk. "When you telephoned the other day, I treated it as an official call. I filed the recording in the Closed Complaints. The S.C. can't reopen the case without new evidence. There's only one way Brascomb could be an obstructionist. If this young man of yours weren't the real Brascomb—Mike. I'm going to check his record. It might tell a lot."

"Now?"

"Tonight. We'll have to break in, but I'll show you how to short-circuit the alarm. I can't ask the Commandant for the film tomorrow, because I don't have a valid reason." She swung her military cloak around her shoulders. "Come along; we've work to do."

The S.C. office is on the top level, near the hub of the interlocking communication tunnels, and the main entrance is heavily guarded. However, Mabel knew a way into the file room through a refuse vent opening on an auxiliary tunnel. Once we were inside, she turned on the overhead light and pulled out one of the countless drawers that lined the walls. She flipped her finger expertly through the tabs and, in a moment, withdrew a narrow strip of film which she fed into a desk machine. As the projection came into focus on the ground glass, I saw that it was the microfilmed record of Albert Brascomb's official existence.

"There's a gap for the last seven years," Mabel pointed out, "when Brascomb was teaching at the Academy. I'll send out an Urgent to the school, and they'll have a duplicate of their record here in twenty-four hours. That's what we'll want to see, I think."

She turned to a wall machine and typed on it briefly.

"If you can't make inquiries about Brascomb, won't you be in trouble when the record comes in?" I asked.

"I don't think so; we should have had it anyway. It's just a matter of routine. The Commandant could have sent the Urgent himself."

SHE CAME back to the projector and ran the film through again, stopping it to read a notation which was heavily underscored to facilitate its location. Over her shoulder I made out a curt report:

> A.K. informs that Brascomb said, "If I had a boy who could think for himself, I could make a man to move the world." S.C. investigation; subject frank to admit statement; explains meaning as metaphor in praise of Alliance education. Social check-up validates. Complaint Closed. QV4S9.

"Archimedes!" I exclaimed.

The name meant nothing to Mabel and, typically, she was so involved in her own thought she had no time to hear my explanation.

"This means," she said," that Brascomb was reported to the S.C. at least once before. The code indicates the investigation was made seven years ago, just before he left to go to the Academy, and it was handled by the former Commandant. Nothing odd-ball ever got past old Vandam; you can bet on it, Mike."

She turned the film ahead and showed me a copy of a Blue Card. "Is that Brascomb's signature, Mike?"

"It's the way he signs his call card at the library."

"All right, that's the card he's carrying now." She turned the film back. "Look at this one." The signature on the second card was identi-

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cal. I told her so, and she seemed a little puzzled. "That's the card Brascomb had eight years ago. It clinches Brascomb's identity, I guess, unless this new signature is a very accurate forgery."

Thoughtfully Mabel began to turn the whole film through the projector once more. "I'd forgotten how long he's been with us, Mike. Most of the scientists crack up after four or five years; none that I've ever heard of have held out for more than seven—none except Brascomb, and he's the only really well-known one of the bunch. In a way, Brascomb is a synonym for Alliance science. Look at the record, Mike! Fifty-eight years ago he came here first; in five years he had developed the ray machine; a year later he went to the Academy to teach. Then he was back here again, after seven years. He only stayed four years then, but he invented the Brascomb Calculator and the Mobile Underground. Another interval of seven years at the Academy; then here again for five; and then—"

"Back to the academy for seven years," I intervened. "It's strange, isn't it, the way he always spends seven years at the Academy?"

Angrily, Mabel put the film back in the file and jerked open another drawer. She showed me a photograph. "There's the real Brascomb," she said.

"Well, that's the man I know. A little older, maybe, but—"

"Older, Mike? That picture was taken twenty-five years ago."

FROWNING, she turned the photograph over and stared at the back. A code word was stamped in the corner of the sheet; beside it was a blue star, and beneath that a signature.

"The code means Brascomb's photograph is never to be duplicated by an S.C. unit for any reason, and it's signed by the National Commander. I've never seen the star before, but I think—" She chewed her lower lip. "There used to be a star like that on the picture of the Alliance Chief, years ago before I was born. Only the S.C. National Commander is supposed to know what it means, but a long time ago I heard— If I could only think!"

She paced the room, wringing her hands. "It was when we arrested Beth. You remember her, Mike—the subversive we found right here in our own S. C. office. That was back in the days before we had the drug, or whatever it is they use now to—"

"What drug, Mabel?"

"When the S.C. makes an arrest, we give the subversive a hypo, or something. I'm not sure what because I'm not in the security detail now, but the idea is to keep the traitor from talking until we're ready for the reorientation. That isn't the point anyway. Beth was arrested before we had the drug. I was assigned to the arresting detail because she was my best friend, and believe me she talked—all sorts of secret stuff about the S.C. and the usual obstructionist nonsense. I remember, now, she said something about the starred pictures! It's right at the front of my mind, Mike!"

In another minute Mabel might have stumbled on the truth. Maybe we could have saved the world. But, suddenly, the sirens began to scream in the tunnels, and all the lights went out.

"Raid drill," I said.

Mabel swore. "Of all the times to—" Then her hand closed on my arm. "No, Mike, listen! The lab bells are ringing, too. This is the real thing!"

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"I've got to get to my station!"

"I report here, so I'm safe. Hurry, Mike!"

I slid down the escape vent and ran into the main tunnel. The huge overhead vitalights were off, because all the power was needed for the ray batteries. Only the watery-blue guide lamps at the intersections were burning. Masses of men and women were pouring into the tunnels. The whole town was beginning to quiver with the vibration of the huge generators that created the power for the batteries.

My emergency post is at Portal Three, where I command the 32nd Battery. Command is a misnomer. There are no men assigned to my detail; I am merely responsible for aiming and firing the raido controls of the twelve guns. For visibility all battery control rooms are housed in semi-circular blisters which project above the surface of the earth. The camouflage is generally excellent and there is no real danger, except at the 32nd which stands beside the larger blister over the Portal and the adjacent launching dock. The size of the structure makes complete concealment impossible.

I reached my post in five minutes, to find the tunnel mouth jammed with huge crates and boxes, which two men were slowly moving into the launching dock under Dr. Brascomb's supervision.

"Is this your stuff?" I demanded.

"Your perception amazes me, Corporal," Brascomb said mildly. "I'm leaving in an hour or so for the Pole Front, to experiment with my new weapon."

"You heard the sirens. It's a raid. We don't open the Portal again until the all-clear."

"A wise precaution for merchants, but in my case the rules don't apply. I'm flying one of our newest Supersons; there isn't an enemy cruiser fast enough to shoot me down."

"I'll have to check with the N.S.R. Control, Dr. Brascomb, to verify your departure permit." I expected to frighten him; I didn't. He simply said,

"Do, by all means. Meanwhile, we'll get on with our loading."

I WENT INTO the tear-shaped control room and turned on the main panel. The red lights glowed and the battery was ready. Then I switched on the Alliance Intercommand. The monotonous voice of the P.E.G. announcer throbbed in the Intercommand speaker. At the moment he was listing the mobilization figures as they were reported by every garrisoned point in the Alliance. For the first time I realized the enormous extent of the alarm.

"Have you checked my permit, Corporal?" I looked up. Brascomb was leaning in the door of the control room, placidly pulling on his pipe. Obediently I turned on the intercom. The N.S.R. Control Room came into focus on the screen, but I could raise no direct response.

Suddenly the monotone of the P.E.G. announcer faded, and the speaker shook with the deep, resonant dramatics of another voice.

"Attention! This is official. The Peoples Emergency Government announces that the enemy launched an air assault on the Alliance forty-five minutes ago, using a radical new ship designed for flight above the stratosphere. It is a fleet of enormous size. Technical Academy astronomers estimate that the first flight numbered fifty thousand ships, with twice as many in the second."

"Space ships!" I whispered. "We've nothing to use against them!"

Brascomb showed not the slightest

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concern; he seemed, rather, amused. He asked me to try to get through to the N.S.R. Control again, but the lines were still jammed.

"Keep trying, Corporal," he asked. "I'm going back to my room to finish a little investigation. Let me know when you've cleared the flight; I'm in Segment 72, Block 5."

I was glad he was gone. His unruffled manner and his conversational insinuations that I could never understand made me nervous. Nonetheless, I was sorry to be alone. That's the worst part of a battery command: the long hours of unrelenting tension and loneliness. I had already gone for eighteen hours without sleep and the drowsiness was becoming unbearable. Reluctantly, I took one of my Alertogland tablets.

At once I felt calmer, more sure of myself, entirely wide awake. However, I hate the pills because of the terrible nightmares that come afterwards, and the loginess and nausea that sometimes last a week or more. Not one person in a hundred is bothered by them the way I am. I've been to the Medics about it; they say there aren't any antidotes.

At intervals the voice of the Alliance Intercommand announced new P.E.G. bulletins. In all, the enemy launched twenty flights of his space ships. But the hours passed, and there was no report of an attack anywhere in the Alliance.

Through the semi-transparent dome of my control room, I could see the colors of dawn in the morning sky. Since I have spent most of my life either at the Front or in town garrison duty, a real sunrise is something very new to me, and I always find the bizarre color, the sense of cosmic disorderliness, chilling. The dull pain began to throb in my head again; I knew it was time for me to take another Alertogland tablet.

The intercom buzzed, and I snapped over the receiver arm. Mabel's face swam into focus. I saw the swarming oval of the tunnel behind her, and I knew she was calling from a public outlet.

"I only have a minute, Mike," she said breathlessly. "But I've got to tell you!"

"What, Mabel? Something wrong?"

"I'm not sure. I went to check in at the S.C. headquarters this morning, and the Commandant questioned me about Brascomb. Routine, he said; but he's investigating all of us to find out who sent the Urgent for Brascomb's record. I didn't tell him anything, and I don't think he can find out, but I'm scared, Mike! They're making so much of it!"

SHE WAS cut off abruptly; I saw the N.S.R. Control Room on the screen, and the sharp, angular face of my commanding officer. He apologized curtly for cutting in, and said he was sending me a relief so I could report for my regular duties at the library. The mention of the library reminded me of Brascomb, and I reported that he was loading a Superson, preparing to leave for the Pole Front. The commander glanced at a check-list on his desk and said: "Everything is all in order; blanket permission to transport three portable ray batteries to the Pole Front. You gave him every facility, of course, Corporal?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but in time of alarm I thought—"

"The scientists are not subject to the usual regulations. Report as much to Dr. Brascomb immediately. Your bungling, Corporal, may have cost us valuable data; this will naturally be a mark against your record. Give Brascomb every personal assistance you

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can. In the future, Corporal, carry out your orders as they are issued; don't improvise. Leave that to your superiors."

The screen went blank.

When my relief came, I went as quickly as I could to the 72nd Segment to give Brascomb the news. I suppressed my own bitterness, just as I suppressed the nagging core of worry Mabel's call had plunged into my mind. There was nothing I could do about either one.

Brascomb's Segment is the finest first-level residential tunnel in town, by custom allocated to the top scientists. The living units are roomy and comfortable, set apart from each other by narrow chemical tubs where the biochemists indulge their hobby of raising decorative vegetation under specially designed vitalights.

Only one of the units was lighted and, through a narrow window, I caught a glimpse of Brascomb working over a machine that seemed curiously familiar. It was a spinning sphere, suspended between floor and ceiling by a wire so delicate it was nearly invisible. A tiny projection was fixed to the axis of the globe. As I watched, the projection seemed to explode and the spinning globe jerked hard against the wire. Brascomb bent over a meter fastened to the base of the wire and made a notation of his observation.

I couldn't pin down my feeling that I had seen the machine before, or the reason why it seemed subtly terrifying. As soon as I rapped on the door, the faint light went out. After a long wait, I was admitted to Brascomb's study. The Intercommand speaker was murmuring crisply in the background, and Brascomb's leather chair was drawn up before the glowing electric heater.

I told him he was free to leave when he wished; as always, he was neither relieved nor angry. But he was kind enough to ask me in and offer me a drink. While he filled the glass, the voice of the Alliance Intercommand suddenly came up loud,

"Attention! Special P.E.G. bulletin to the Alliance. The unprovoked attack made on us last night has been turned back. No enemy ship is now in the air, and no damage has been done to any Alliance territory. The all-clear is ordered."

"With news like that," Brascomb said, "I think I could stand a drink myself."

"We've shot them all down!" I said; it seemed hard to believe.

"Yes, Corporal? On the contrary, I think the enemy has found a way out of the stalemate; and he's given us another chance."

The voice on the speaker broke in again:

"Special to all Alliance garrisons! Early this morning enemy fire ceased in Sectors 8 and 30. Alliance troops moved forward without opposition and have stabilized a new front fifty miles behind the former enemy lines. A general enemy collapse is reported in all sectors. In celebration of the victory, the Alliance proclaims a General Liberty."

"Another chance," Brascomb repeated dreamily, as the excited voice faded. "And our last one." Thoughtfully he swirled the drink in his glass, watching the reflection of light on its surface. "Corporal, it's fortunate you kept me waiting as long as you did. There's no need, now, to use my weapon. It is a little drastic." He laughed. "But this is no time for talk; I'm sure you're anxious to go down and join the fun in the main tunnels."

AS BRASCOMB'S door shut behind me, the overhead vitalights came on once again. The tunnels were al-

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ready filling with a mass of excited, chattering people. The growing mob moved steadily toward the center of town, where the tunnels come together in the first-level hub. The P.E.G. free-cocktail dispensaries were being opened and long queues were already forming in front of them. The N.S.R. Band was marching and playing the old, rousing airs.

I had hoped to find Mabel, but as I pushed through the mob the dull ache began to stab at the base of my brain. Abruptly I lost interest in everything. The drink Brascomb had given me had been unusually powerful; I suppose it was drugged as well. After one or two Alertogland tablets, it is always impossible to think clearly. Vaguely I knew I wanted to ask Mabel something; vaguely I knew I should have been alarmed about the apparatus I had seen at Brascomb's. But all of that could wait. Nothing seemed as important as getting away from the confusion, to a place where I could sleep.

A P.E.G. General Liberty automatically cancels all military assignments, except on an active Front, for an eight-hour period. It was, therefore, unnecessary for me to report at once to the library. I staggered back to the deserted barracks, set my automatic reveille, and slumped into my bunk.

As I slept I had a notion that the intercom above my head buzzed repeatedly, but I didn't have the will to arouse myself enough to turn the receiver arm.

When the reveille jerked me awake, my head was relatively clear, but the second phase of the reaction to the Alertogland tablets had begun. My whole body was logy, slow, tormented with exhaustion. I was depressed. Thought came sluggishly, if at all. I was capable of routine thought, in an established pattern, on a stimulus-response level, but my mind was too disorganized for creativeness, for the comprehension of any new situation.

I was nearly dressed before I became aware of the terrible quiet in the tunnels. The General Liberty was over, of course, but the revelry had never before died so suddenly. Nameless fears burned in the bleak clouds of my melancholy. With shaking fingers I snapped on the Alliance Intercommand, to hear the tail-end of a news bulletin,

"...and the Alliance has made an orderly retreat to the original Front, with no casualties; the command calls upon all loyal people of the Alliance for renewed efforts and a rededication to national duty."

It was meaningless. Somehow, the territorial gains so proudly announced that morning had been lost. Heavy-hearted, I pulled on my coat and went to report at the library. The speakers in the tunnels were blaring a new P.E.G. bulletin,

"The enemy has attempted to lead our front-line troops into a gigantic trap by surrendering certain vital sectors. We have perceived the trick and performed a strategic retreat to our original position without the loss of a single man."

THE KNELL-BLAST of the voice was like the call of a funeral trumpet. My sluggish reactions began to stiffen with hatred for an enemy who could practice such deception. It was a psychological blow at our morale, to give us a taste of victory and snatch it away again. But it was a cheap attack; the Alliance would not crack, nor would it falter in determination.

Subconsciously I knew these thoughts were not exactly mine, but rather the purring of the tense voice as it was translated into meaning by

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my own mind. The voice ground on,

"Let their guns be still; let their lines cease firing. The Alliance is undeceived. We will throw back at them the defiance of our worst barrage, for an eternity if need be. In the end, our sacrifices and our courage will win complete victory!" The solemn, noble strains of the Alliance anthem swelled in the tunnels.

It was then that I met Brascomb again. He stumbled into me at the intersection by the library. He was wearing a fur-lined Superson suit; and he was boisterously drunk.

"So we meet again, Corporal," he chuckled, trying to throw his arm around my shoulder.

I pulled away. "I have no time, Dr. Brascomb. I'm reporting to my post."

"Ah, yes; eternal duty, always calling." He smirked. "And I find I shall have to use my new weapon, after all. Otherwise, I must stand by and watch the perpetual torment of a civilization trapped by a perfect illusion. We have condemned ourselves to live forever like frightened rats, buried in cement tunnels, afraid to look on the naked universe, terrified by a sunrise—shadow-boxing with the nonexistent."

"The nonexistent?" I repeated.

"The enemy had his space ships; and the universe is wide."

"We turned back their attack!"

"Corporal, your faith is priceless. And, consequently, it's time for mankind to start again—to wipe the slate clean; pull down the temple pillars; begin over, from scratch."

This nonsense seemed to convulse him with amusement, but after a moment he snatched the lapels of my jacket, and his face became tensely sober as he continued.

"You've taken the tablets, Corporal; they all have. It's the reason for granting a General Liberty. You can't think, now, except to be obedient. I'm a scientist, and something of a gambler as well; I'm willing to give mankind an even break. If you can win for the rest of the automatons, I'll concede some virtue in the system, something worth saving. And you're the only one with the faintest chance of discovering the truth. You've heard me talk; you've seen the model. Now, go and use the talk-tapes."

I said promptly, "Of course I won't, Dr. Brascomb. It's against orders."

"That's part of the gamble; you have to get enough courage to break the rules. I'll even give you the call number; listen after the seventy-ninth segment." He scribbled on a scrap of paper; when I rejected it, he stuffed it into my pocket. "You'll hear a lovely legend, Corporal, but that's the way it happened once before. Strip off the stuff about the gods, and remember the scientific fact—the axis isn't stable; the earth can be moved. If you win in time, you can stop me. If not—well, there'll be a few survivors. They can't do any worse than we have."

HE SLAPPED me on the back and was gone. Dazed, I stumbled down the incline into the library. Strange phantoms rose up in the dark places of my mind. I grasped for them, but they danced out of my reach.

Three scientists came in, and I had half a dozen tapes to dial for them. When I was alone at the desk again, I took Brascomb's scrap of paper and laid it in front of me, staring at the numbers. Sweat formed on the palms of my hands; sweat trickled down the ridges of my chest. It was so easy to dial the number—and so deadly! I was sacrificing my soul if I broke the rules, yet I had to conquer the wraiths of terror that stalked my mind.

Painfully I worked out a subterfuge. No one would know if I heard a

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tape when the library was empty. One by one the three scientists finished their work and left. I dialed the call number of Brascomb's talk-tape.

Weakly I left the desk and went into the reading room. My intercom buzzed then, but I paid no attention to it.

The boxed tape slid out on the table. I put it in the playback machine, turning it up to the seventy-ninth reading.

The thing was done. There was no turning back.

As I accepted that fact, a screaming pain walked through my brain for a moment, leaving me limp; but immediately afterwards my mind became clearly oriented. I could think normally.

My intercom buzzed again; and again I ignored it.

A gentle voice came from the machine. At first I thought Brascomb had played a bitter hoax on me, for the tape was nothing more than a compilation of legends made by an individual named Bullfinch. The seventy-ninth reading was a fairy tale about Phaethon, who drove the sun-god's chariot across the heavens one day. He lost command of the horses, and the sun plunged out of control in a new direction.

"The clouds began to smoke," the cultured, emotionless voice recounted, "and the mountain tops took fire; the fields are parched with heat, the plants wither, the trees with their leafy branches burn, the harvest is ablaze! But these are small things. Great cities perished, with their walls and towers; whole nations with their people were consumed to ashes! The forest-clad mountains burned. The earth cracked open. The sea shrank up. Where there was water, it became a dry plain; and the mountains that lie beneath the waves lifted up their heads and became islands."

The terrifying truth began to come clear. The ancient disaster occurred because the sun had been driven through a new course in the heavens. But the sun is always fixed; only the satellite planets move.

Only the earth can move! Archimedes! Suddenly Brascomb's drawing and his dancing sphere made sense. "Strip off the stuff about the gods," he had said, "and remember the scientific fact—the axis isn't stable; the world can be moved." And Brascomb was on his way to the Pole Front with three portable ray machines, which, he had told me, could be altered to produce a thrust more powerful than that of any rocket.

I WAS PARALYZED with fear. Leadenly, I went to the desk to call the S.C. The intercom buzzed for a third time. I switched over the receiver arm and Mabel's face came into focus.

"Mike! At last I've found you! They've—"

"No time for talk," I said and cut her off. I tried to call the S.C., but Mabel was on the screen again.

"You've got to listen, Mike!" she pleaded. "They're coming after me now, and you'll be next! The S.C., Mike! I know the truth about Brascomb!"

"Well, report it! That's just what I want—"

"The S.C. already know—at least the Commandant does."

My throat went cold and I could only reply in a whisper. "They know; and they've done nothing about it? Nothing at all?"

"It was planned by the High Command decades ago. Brascomb is two people—three—maybe four. It's what

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that star on his picture means. His name stands for so much they don't dare let it die! He's a synonym for science. We believe in him! When the first Brascomb cracked up years ago, the government sent in a substitute, a double hand-picked from the Technical Academy. They've been doing it over and over. So Brascomb's O.K., Mike; it's all our fault, for meddling. But the reorientation—it's—it's horrible. All day long I've tried to call you, ever since I— Listen, Mike; during the liberty they were hunting everywhere for me. I've been hiding in every corner in town, every old vent tunnel. In the crowd it was easy to get away; now I haven't a chance. But you have, Mike! You have! You've got to get away!"

On the screen I saw three masked men in S.C. uniforms move up behind her. As she turned toward them, a swirl of mist hissed around her. She fell limp and the screen went blank.

Mabel may have thought she was warning me, but she should have known the S.C. better. It takes forty-five seconds to trace an intercom call. My machine is already blacked out. I just tried it to see. Or maybe this is what Mabel intended to do; if she were caught, she meant for me to be, too, since it was my idea in the first place to suspect Brascomb.

It's funny, isn't it? I have the truth that can save our world, and there's no one I can tell it to. They'll use the gas when they come, and I won't have a chance then. I can't get through to anybody on my intercom. I might go into the tunnel and shout what I know, but no one would believe me, and the S.C. would shut me up before I said ten words. I'd stand a kind of chance, if there were a scientist in the library, but the reading room is empty and the S.C. will see to it no one else comes in.

They're sure I know they will arrest me, but they'll leave me here alone for a while. The waiting is supposed to terrify me. It makes the reorientation more—what is the phrase I once heard Mabel's commandant use?—that's it—more enjoyable.

I always thought I would be afraid if this ever happened to me; oddly, I'm not at all now. One way or the other our whole world is finished. The irony is very amusing. No wonder Brascomb laughed! The discipline and the organization of the Alliance is the one perfect institution created by man. It is so absolute in its perfection it is incapable of hearing the fact of its own destruction.

UNTIL THE equator shifts and the seas run dry and the earth crust cracks and burns, until the mountains fall and the forests flame, until the great cities die and the seas overflow their shores, we can do nothing but fire out host of weapons at an empty, unmanned enemy line. Frightened rats, Brascomb called us, shadow-boxing with the nonexistent.

I wonder if the enemy fleet have found a habitable world, or have they merely escaped the stalemate here to find a slower death than ours, to die piecemeal, a glittering smear of dust on the vast space of the universe?

It's this waiting that gave me the idea of putting the whole thing on a talk-tape. Any one of the play-back machines can be used to make a new recording. I hope fanciers of Mr. Bullfinch won't mind my substitution of this tale for his.

One of Brascomb's survivors may find it some day.

That is, if there are any survivors.

I don't understand how he can be so sure...

...The Young Ones found it when they were playing swing tag over the

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circle canyon. The girl amused herself for a while tearing off bits of it and twisting them through her hair; the boy, throwing long pieces into the air and watching them float down toward the floor of the canyon, thin, red snakes dancing and twisting in the capricious winds.

At dusk they went back to the picnic grove. There was still a little of the pretty tape left, and the girl showed it to Uncle Talbot. But when Grandma heard that they had found the tape in a new cave in the canyon wall—she snatched it away and held it to her breast, keening over it.

"You've destroyed it!" she moaned. "Destroyed a gift of the gods!"

"Gift, nonsense," Uncle Talbot snorted. "It's nothing more than trash left here by another picnic party."

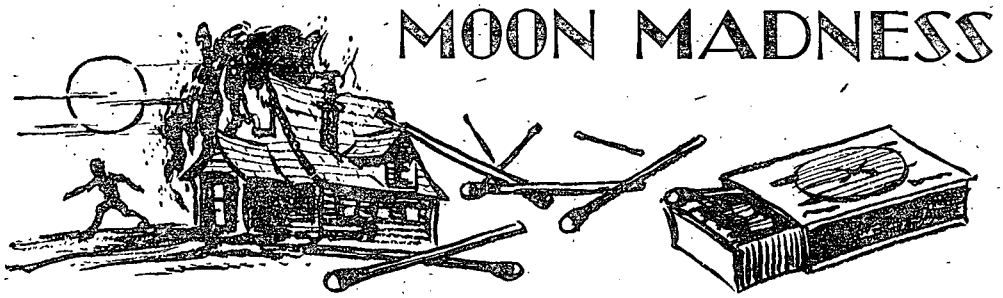
But Grandma was not to be quieted easily. She held the center of the family stage and she meant to keep it. She even promised to tell the children the tale of how the gods came to build the circle canyon.

They were naturally delighted.

But Uncle Talbot was so furious he swung up into the topmost branches of the trees and spent the evening flipping his tail at them.

THE END

MOON MADNESS



FOR A LONG time it has been regarded as a popular superstition, this idea of moon madness. For centuries men have believed that the moon influenced human affairs and only comparatively recently has the idea been going into the wane. But a series of statistical observations has led to a reexamination of the problem, and the intelligence has emerged that there is more to moon madness than meets the eye.

For example, psychologists have discovered a peculiar correlation between the phases of the moon and pyromania! Pyromaniacs set more fires during full-moon periods than at other times. Irrational murders all over the world, murders committed for no apparent reason other than impulse, coincide with full-moon periods.

Now this evidence is insufficient in itself to establish a causal effect between the phenomena. But other, extremely logically planned, experiments have shown a definite relationship. Duke University has been conducting a group of experiments in which the electrical potentials of the brain are measured with encephalographic instruments. Probes are attached to selected portions of the head and brain-voltages measured. Amazingly enough, with the waxing of the full moon, such electrical activity shows a tremendous increase.

Directors of insane asylums and institutions for the mentally deficient discover that the full moon brings with it a rise in disturbance of their patients' emotional balance. All this defies "logical" explanation.

One of the scientists checking this matter has remarked that "we are essentially electrical machines which are in some way affected by such a universal disturbance as the movement of the moon". Those sound like strange words to come from a scientist. But the evidence is irrefutable.

Farmers, even the very scientific ones, will swear that the full moon affects crop-planting periods. No amount of so-called experimental evidence will change this view. And who knows? Perhaps they are right.

If anything, objective science is discovering that there are quantities which defy simple analysis. All the measuring and weighing in the world are insufficent to account for the complexity of human reactions to things and events.

It is interesting to check one's own reaction to the state of the moon. Try it sometime, but don't pull any axe murders!

—*June Lurie*

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Bri couldn't figure which was crazier—the gift or the donors

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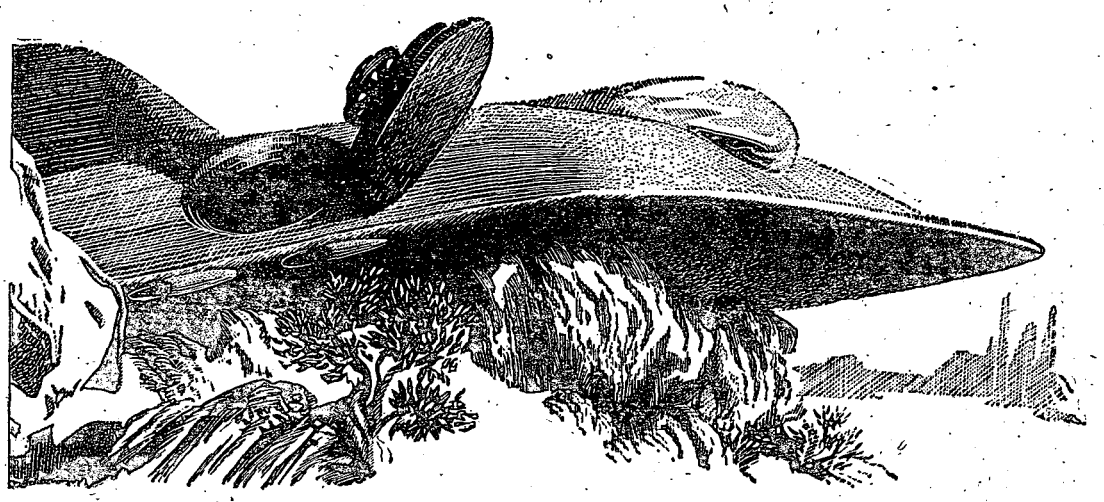
THE TALKING CUBE

By E. K. Jarvis



The thing Bri Revens got from the alien visitors was merely a block of shining metal and it talked a blue streak. They were naturally suspicious, but they soon learned this talking cube was no square!

BRI REVENS began to be afraid again as he parked his surface car in the empty slot across from the *Inform* office. It was late Sixth-day morning and Wanbury was thronged with week-end shoppers. Revens looked at the faces of his friends and neighbors and cold terror gripped him as he remembered the menace that hung over them.

For a while, on the road down from the hills, he had been able to push the nightmare out of his mind. The sun had been warm, the air crisp and clear, the rolling fields brilliant with the breathtaking colors of summer's end: the tangible, the familiar, the comfortable reality. The other thing had seemed a fantasy, the cloying, misty terror of a dream. As he

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switched off the motor his eyes fell on the small metal cube lying on the seat beside him. That was real enough. He could hold it in his hand; he could feel the cold metal and the rhythmic vibration; he could hear the emotionless Voice.

And that tiny metal box was the heart of his nightmare.

Revens picked it up; almost at once the cube began to throb and the Voice whispered:

"You have twenty-nine days left, Mr. Revens."

He jammed the box into the pocket of his hunting jacket, and walked across the street to the *Inform* office. The important thing was to tell the people what he had seen, and a fact-print would do that for him. Afterwards the planet would unite of its own accord—all its nations and races, in spirit and wealth and purpose. No force existed that could entirely destroy a united people.

Gran Tartin, the owner of the *Inform,* was leaning back in his chair reading proof sheets, his feet propped up on the desk. He got up when he saw Revens, extending his hand warmly. Revens felt the outline of the cube in his pocket, and suddenly he had no idea how to begin. He began very lamely.

"You know, Gran, I like to collect plant specimens for my classes and —and— Well, yesterday, I went up to the hills for the week end. While I—"

"Did you take what's his name—that new fellow—Dr. Swaith! Did you take him along?"

"No." Revens frowned. The question was typical of Gran, an unimportant tangent that strayed from the point.

"Thought I saw him in your car."

"Oh, that. He asked me to drive him out to one of the farms on the Hilford Road. Somebody he had to see or something."

"Chaiski Swaith, he calls himself. The name's phony, if you ask me. What's he doing in Wanbury, anyway? Six months ago he just dropped in on us out of the blue, and bought the Danver place. We never see him. He doesn't go anywhere or do anything. What I want to know is: how's a guy like that make a living?"

"He's a physicist, Gran; he says he's writing a book. But the thing I wanted to see you about—"

"Most people who think they can write, ask everybody and his brother to read their stuff; Doc Swaith doesn't. My wife says he hasn't even inquired about joining the Wanbury Writers' Club."

"I didn't come to talk about Dr. Swaith, Gran! While I was up in the hills—"

"The whole thing's suspicious," the editor persisted. "Somebody ought to be checking up on that guy's background. Chaiski Swaith: that's a likely combination of names. You know where the first one comes from, Bri. It's outright Collectionist."

"Gran, please! Let me tell you what I—"

"O. K., Bri. You saw some weeds up in our hills that aren't supposed to grow there, and you want a piece in the fact-print about it." Condescendingly, Tartin took a pad and pencil and sat down at his desk, snapping on the green-shaded lamp. "I can't get it in tomorrow, Bri, but maybe we can squeeze it in First or Second-day next week."

BEVENS told his story, then. On Fifth-day afternoon, he said, he left for the hills as soon as school closed. His camping gear was already packed in the trunk of his surface

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car. By sunset he had parked at the forest guard station, his usual procedure. He changed his clothes and pulled on his shoulder pack, walking to the desolate, wildly overgrown gorge known as the Dark Hole, where he made camp for the night. Some time after midnight he had been awakened by the sound of a motor. A huge metal sphere came gently to rest at the head of the gorge. From an open slit a brilliant orange light swept the surrounding ground, paralyzing Revens when it touched him. A port slid open and two grotesquely terrifying monstrosities sprang out of the sphere. Walking awkwardly, on two long, weirdly jointed legs, they came and stood over Revens, speaking to him in his own language.

They told him they were citizens of another planet, known to Revens as Ripian; they had been sent to scout the civilization of Revens' people. In thirty days the vanguard of their space fleet would arrive to complete the conquest of the planet. Since their objective was the acquisition of raw material and slave labor, they wanted as little bloodshed as possible. Their weapons were sufficiently superior to make victory inevitable, whatever happened. They had, therefore, selected Revens—because he happened to be isolated at a place where they could reach him—to deliver their ultimatum to his people. He had thirty days in which to save the planet from destruction. If it surrendered at once, the occupation would be painless, and the slavery, once the people had adjusted to it, would not seem hard.

Revens had been talking quickly, with a slowly rising volume, to prevent an interruption; but suddenly Gran Tartin broke into raucous laughter.

"Never thought you indulged, Bri," he said, "seeing you're a teacher. No wonder you like to go up to the hills alone. Collecting specimens! That's the best excuse I've heard yet. You go home and sober up; I'll keep this thing under my hat."

"I know how it sounds," Revens admitted. "But I have proof." He took the cube out of his pocket and laid it on Tartin's desk. "It's a sort of speaking box they use to talk back and forth across space. They gave it to me. They said they'd negotiated with primitives before, and they'd learned from experience they had to leave some kind of tangible evidence behind."

Still smiling, the editor picked up the tiny box. "A block of metal," he said, "doesn't prove much."

THE VOICE whispered, "Revens speaks the truth."

"So that's the gimmick!" Tartin laughed, but nonetheless he dropped the cube, eyeing it speculatively. "How's it work, Bri?"

"I don't know."

"It's a clever hoax; I've got to hand it to you for that."

The Voice said calmly, "Examine the metal, sir; have you ever seen any like it?"

"I'm not a metallurgist; I couldn't tell lead from nickel."

"Pick the cube up. How much do you think it weighs?"

Reluctantly Tartin held the cube in his palm. "It is a little light," he admitted. "I've a scale out in the press room. Let's get the exact weight, Bri."

Revens followed Tartin into the big room behind the editorial office. The editor dropped the box into the basket of a dusty scale on the wrapping counter; and then he whistled with amazement, for the indicator needle

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had not moved at all.

"Don't be alarmed," the Voice purred loudly, in order to be heard above the pounding of the presses. "The metal is not entirely weightless. In your gravity, I suppose it would come to the hundredth part of a gram, maybe a little less."

"That's nonsense, Bri! You couldn't make a metal that light."

"He didn't, of course," the Voice said. "Now, sir, let me suggest another line of investigation. The cube seems fragile; try to destroy it."

After a slight hesitation, Tartin snatched the cube and threw it furiously to the floor. It gashed a neat "V" in the stone, and bounced against the wall, tearing a long splinter out of the woodwork and smashing a window with vibration.

The presses fell silent and Tartin's three printers crowded around curiously as Revens stooped to pick up the box. In answer to their questions, he told his story a second time. While he talked, Tartin went to his desk speaking-box and called a number. When he came back he was smiling again.

"I just spoke to the chemist over at Cartin's plant," he announced with a note of triumph. "He says he can make tests to find out how any metal is made. Are you willing to let him call your bluff, Bri?"

"What's the point?"

"If you got this thing from—well, the way you say you did, it'll be made of a metal we can't identify."

"Perhaps. But don't waste time," Revens said. "They've given us less than a month; if we're going to defend ourselves at all, we've got to get organized."

The interlude with the chemist was decisive. He pronounced the cube an alloy—"in all probability"—but beyond that he would say nothing pertinent without melting down the cube, which his laboratory was not equipped to do. Revens found it necessary to tell his story again. The chemist was as skeptical and as amused as the editor, but he had a suggestion.

"I'm told we've got one of the top men in science living right here in Wanbury—Doc Swaith. He has a complete lab fixed up in his house. Show him the cube; he'll tell you how it's made."

"It's a waste of time!" Revens exclaimed. "The important thing is the invasion. We've got to tell the world about it. It's up to you, Gran; why else are you printing a fact-print?"

WHEN THE laughter of the chemist and the editor had subsided, the chemist said:

"Fifty years ago—maybe even twenty—you might have pulled it off, Revens; but not today. Our knowledge of science has advanced too fast. Nice try, though, and darn clever the way you make the thing talk. I don't suppose you'll let me in on that little secret?"

"I wish I could!"

Revens saw nothing to do but trail along with Gran Tartin to Dr. Swaith's rambling frame house on the outskirts of Wanbury. He expected nothing but new frustrations and delays, yet if he tried to back out he would seem to be admitting the hoax. He was surprised to find the scientist at home. Dr. Swaith had ridden with him as far as the Hilford Road on the previous afternoon, and he had left Revens with the impression that he would spend the week end with friends.

Dr. Swaith received them courteously and listened politely while Revens told his story for the third

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time. Revens fully expected lusty skepticism from the scientist; but Dr. Swaith displayed no visible reaction at all. He was tall, lithe, and very handsome; surprisingly young, Revens thought, but with none of the stereotyped snap-judgment of youth. He took them into his laboratory, where he examined the cube carefully. Eventually he pulled on a heavy smock and asbestos gloves and took the box into an adjoining room, leaving Revens and Tartin alone.

The editor strolled around the laboratory, examining the beakers and retorts, the shelves of chemicals, and the gleaming machines.

"He's got a lot of stuff here," he decided.

"There aren't many labs like this, even in the top schools," Revens agreed.

"What's he doing with it? You're a science teacher; you ought to know."

"There are lots of sciences, Gran; my specialization is plant life. Dr. Swaith's a physicist and, for what it's worth, I'd guess he's working on elemental structural fission."

"The released energy bomb! I told you this guy isn't to be trusted! Well, our trip out here is going to pay off for me, anyway." Eagerly Tartin took a notebook from his pocket and began a methodical listing of the names on the bottles and the brand names on the mechanical equipment. He was still writing when Dr. Swaith returned half an hour later, carrying the metal cube carefully with a pair of tongs. Tartin stuffed his notebook guiltily into his pocket, while Dr. Swaith dropped the cube into a porcelain dish.

"It'll be cool enough to touch in a few minutes," he said.

"Well, what's the verdict, Doc?" Tartin asked, boisterously jovial.

"I have no idea what the metal is, and no way of finding out," the physicist answered. "I subjected it to the highest temperature science can create, and I couldn't melt it. On the face of the evidence, I would say that Mr. Revens is telling the truth."

DR. SWAITH spoke so sincerely, Gran Tartin reserved his laughter until he was outside again and alone with Revens. Revens asked,

"You'll print the story now, Gran?"

"I'm not a fool. Swaith's playing along with your hoax for reasons of his own. I'll tell you what you do: if this thing's so important to everybody, why don't you take it up with the United Sphere Government?"

"Maybe I will!"

"When the U. S. G. sends out the story, I may find room for it on the comic page. You know—local hoax makes good."

Violently furious, penned in by frustrations, Revens drove home. He was in no mood to face his wife's usual petulance, but a great deal more than that smashed up at him when he pushed open the front door.

It was mid-afternoon by that time. Although Revens had not convinced Gran Tartin that the story made valid news, Revens had told it three times. Two of his audiences—the printers and the chemist—had been sufficiently impressed by the bizarre nature of the adventure to repeat the tale. That was all the publicity necessary in Wanbury, but unfortunately the general conclusion seemed to be that Revens had been on a magnificent drunk up in the hills—choice gossip under any circumstances in a small town, but inflammably so when it involved a teacher.

Revens found his wife lying in the living room on the couch, weeping hysterically, solaced by her grim-faced

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mother. Revens did what he could to mollify Collia. He explained; he apologized; he showed her the talking cube. But the Voice made no impression whatsoever. Collia cried shrilly,

"The disgrace of it, Bri! A man in your position. I'll never live it down. Why, my friends have been calling up since noon. What can I possibly say?"

Suddenly Collia's enormous ado seemed ridiculous. Revens turned on his heel and walked out. He knew it was the only reaction he should have expected from his wife, yet to him the approaching menace was so terrifying and so real that he had hoped she might listen to him, just this once.

He went to the kitchen and prepared food for himself. His wife's mother—who had lived with them for a decade—pranced into the kitchen and out again, getting ice for "Collia's poor, aching head." She came close to Revens for a moment, hissing furiously,

"I suppose you had a woman up there with you, too."

Revens left the house and for a long time he strolled aimlessly through the well-manicured streets of Wanbury, enjoying the crisp wind and the colored leaves swirling over the walks. As he watched the crowds of children playing on the lawns and the adults leisurely completing an accumulation of chores set aside for a Sixth-day afternoon, he realized that the great majority of them knew—or would shortly hear—the horror that he had experienced. They knew the truth and refused to believe it; some of them had seen proof and mistaken it for a clever gadget.

Revens blamed himself for his failure to communicate; somehow he had not gone about the telling as he should. Yet he had to convince them—not only here in Wanbury, but all the people of the planet. They had to put aside personal ambition and national quarrels, complexes and intolerances; only a united sphere—united in spirit and technology and resources—would stand a chance of defending itself against enslavement and destruction.

THE WORK of arousing the people had fallen to him—the job of saving civilization. No one, Revens thought desperately, was less suited to the task.

Yet it was possible that he had failed in Wanbury because his neighbors knew him too intimately. For fifteen years he had taught science at the upper school, neither well nor poorly. A teacher was too clearly the servant of the community to be genuinely respected—he was snapped to attention by the whims of a school board, a director, or an infuriated parent, underpaid and overworked; morally supervised; milked dry by every charity; and ridiculed, on one occasion or another, in every instrument of popular amusement. In another town, where Revens was unknown, he could expect acceptance on the basis of the evidence he had to present. Earlier he had told Gran Tartin he would take the cube to the United Sphere Government. Why not? The U.S.G. was at least a sounding board for the planetary audience he had to reach, and time was desperately short.

In a box in his bureau Revens had the accumulated savings of fifteen years of parsimonious economy. He took half the money, leaving the rest for Collia, packed an overnight case, and departed from Wanbury on the six o'clock public electric car.

Two days later he was in New Port, the huge harbor city where

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the first sessions of the United Sphere Government were being held. New Port might have been, in fact, the capital city of the planet if the separate nations had ceded any authority to the U.S.G. Since they had not, the Assembly had become a shadow of the ideal; its only practical use was to serve as a neutral meeting ground for the body of states led by Revens' government and the enemy nations, the Collectionists.

Revens had mapped out what seemed to be a workable strategy. He intended to attack the problem on several fronts at once. The only thing that mattered was that he would be heard, whether through the fact-prints, the monthlies, the air-wave casts, or the U.S.G.

For three days he wandered through a series of offices and left his name with countless highly polished young women, but he made no progress. At the U.S.G. building he got no closer to the speaker's rostrum than a seat at the back of the visitor's gallery. When he indicated that he wanted to address the Assembly, minor officials shied away from him in horror; and one pert young lady conscientiously proposed that he ought to visit a mind doctor.

Finally, in desperation, he gave up patience and discretion. He began to talk anywhere and everywhere—showing the cube to hotel clerks and bellhops, waitresses at corner lunch stands, cab drivers, tourists in the hotel lobby or at the U.S.G. In doing so he stumbled upon a touchstone: he had transformed himself into an odd-ball, and the queer and the misguided always found it easy to gain the ear of the public.

Within twenty-four hours Revens' story was given a paragraph in a whimsical column that described the quirks of New Port's inhabitants for the edification of the less neurotic hinterland. After that two fact-print writers came to see him. They published the intervew as straight fact—albeit on page five—under the title-line, PLANET URGED TO UNITE AGAINST SPACE INVADER.

TWENTY-ONE days left. But the story was beginning to move! Other fact-prints had picked it up. One writer brought a scientist to examine the cube. He made a pontifical pronouncement in pompous double talk, which, in substance, was an admission that he could not explain how the metal box was made. The story moved up to page three, and it ran for almost a quarter of a column. A mind doctor took the trouble to inform the press that Revens was suffering from a harmless hallucination. And the *Daily Collectionist* head-titled the talking cube as a new propaganda device of the nefarious Profitists designed to discredit the latest peace offensive of Collectivism.

That afternoon a large, overdressed, double-breasted woman of indeterminable years surrounded Revens when he came into the lobby of his hotel. Fixing him with an hypnotic stare, and clutching his coat to make sure that escape was impossible, she announced,

"Mr. Revens, I won't—I simply won't—take no for an answer. I like to straighten that out at the start."

He muttered something; at least he tried to, but she rushed on,

"We pay no fee, of course; but it's all for the good of the Cause."

Some minutes and many words later Revens discovered that she was inviting him to make a speech. She whisked him away in a sleek, black surface car. Vehemently she continued to discourse upon the Cause, but he couldn't make anything of it,

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and didn't care. He was satisfied enough to have found an audience that would listen to him.

They went to a barren, white-walled room on the second floor of a clothing store. A fan of flags was erected at the back on a low platform, and above it a red lettered steamer proclaimed, "The Patriotic Mothers for Peace, Band 97."

After an interminable introduction, Revens rose to face crowded rows of woman, in appearance all much like his hostess—massive, extravagantly dressed, moon-faced, and soporifically perfumed. They listened more or less attentively while he talked, and they displayed a mild interest in the cube when the Voice added confirmation.

"Now my point is this," Revens concluded, in the formularized pattern he had developed. "We are a divided planet, caught in our own personal and national problems. If we can put all these petty things aside and organize the sphere for unified resistance, I think we stand a chance of defeating this outside aggression and saving ourselves. But we must act quickly; we have less than three weeks left."

After scattered applause, there followd an ordeal known as the question period. The ladies wanted information upon such things as "the economic dialectic" of the invader. They asked Revens if he had organized a committee for the defense of the planet; where the meetings were held; and if it had yet been dignified by classification on any of the subversive lists.

Nonetheless, the women seemed pleased with his talk, for in the next few days he was invited to address chapters of "The Friends of Progressive Peace," "The Martyr Mothers of Future Wars," and "God-believers for Collectionism, Inc." Revens accepted each invitation with the hope that he might arouse someone, somewhere to the coming danger, yet each meeting ended exactly as the first one had. Revens was amazed that so many thousands of people had developed so highly the skill of submerging themselves in triviality at the expense of the important.

REVENS' first talk was reported in the fact-prints, in a tone of sophisticated amusement, but on subsequent days the news turned serious. With sixteen days left before the invasion, he awoke to find himself infamous. The full catastrophe descended upon him in a series of shock waves, beginning with the buzzing of the bedside speaking-box that dragged him out of a sound sleep.

It was the Sphere Press Association asking him for a statement. Mechanically he began to reel off the familiar story, but the laconic voice cut him short with totally irrelevant questions. Where had he taught school before coming to New Port? How long had he been there? Why had he left? In rapid succession the speaking-box buzzed three more times, and Revens answered equally pointless inquiries from the Transplanet Press and two local newspapers. Somewhere in the confusion of this new madness, Revens broke into the rapid-fire inquisition to ask just what it was all about.

"Read the morning fact-prints, my friend," he was advised. "Nothing like it to keep you up to date."

When the speaking-box buzzed again, Revens ignored it. He took the fact-print, which had been left outside his door, and spread it open on his bed. By force of habit he ignored the eight-column head-title and searched the tiny, two-inch boxes for something that might concern him. He found it at once, datelined from a remote Farmland hamlet.

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Having read the press association accounts of Revens' warning of impending disaster, a local woman had suddenly seen visions and on the spot a group of neighbors had organized the First Church of Revealed Revenism. They were preparing themselves for the end of civilization not, as so many similar movements had before them, by disposing of their wealth, but rather by storing up their goods and resolving to pay no more taxes. This last wisdom had been revealed, in a secondary vision, to the prophetess' husband, and it proved so alluring that Churches were already spreading to other prosperous communities of the Farm Belt.

Revens was choked with alarm. He had set out with a single truth to arouse the planet so that it might be saved. All he had succeeded in doing was falling among the fanatics. Why was he so repeatedly thwarted in trying to reach the men of good sense? He felt the crushing weight of his own inadequacy, like a cold, wet rope drawing tight around his throat. He had tried and he had failed and the guilt was his. There were sixteen days left; what else could he do?

Then he read the eight-column head-title, "RORY COMMITTEE NAMES TOP SUBVERSIVE IN EDUCATION." Slightly smaller type promised that Bri J. Revens would be subpoenaed before the end of the week.

Without breathing Revens read the words over and over, until the type blurred in streaks before his eyes. His instinctive reaction was that the name must be a coincidence. There would be another Bri J. Revens. But no; in the body of the story was a statement by the Director of Wanbury Schools, and on the second page a picture of Collia—weeping and leaning on the arm of her mother.

THE THING was too enormous for him to grasp and, for a moment, he clung desperately to the sanity of trivialities. He found himself staring at the likeness of Collia and wondering why he had married her. Once she had seemed very attractive; probably they had even been in love. But they had moved slowly apart, perhaps because they had never been able to afford a child; perhaps because Collia had always wanted so many little things that he was unable to give her. Candidly he blamed himself, his own inadequacy, just as he blamed himself for his failure to communicate to his fellows the extent of the coming horror.

Dry, racking grief wrung his mind as he read the fact-print story through again. Elector Rory was, of course, a bombastic fool, using his position as Chairman of the Rory Committee to promote his own candidacy for the presidency. He had doubtlessly read Revens' story; it would be easy enough to discover that Revens was a teacher. Those two isolated facts gave the Elector ground for a frontal attack upon education. Revens was terrified, not only by the prospect of the ordeal itself, but because his hands would be tied. Time would slip past in futility, and the freedom of the planet would be lost.

Suddenly Revens' tension relaxed. The bleak terror rolled away from his mind. He had hit bottom; nothing else could happen. He was trapped and cornered, but it was a trap he might turn to his own advantage. Elector Rory dominated the front page of every fact-print in the nation. Revens would now share it, and he would at last have the audience he wanted. He could turn the spectacle and shame into success.

Revens was whistling happily when he dressed and went down to the lobby

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for breakfast. At the desk he met Dr. Chaiski Swaith, asking for the number of Revens' room. Revens' voice choked with pleasure. This was somehow like a sign: his luck had changed. Dr. Swaith held out his hand.

"It was in the *Inform* last night," he explained simply. "I took the first air-glider out. It occurred to me that you could use a friend."

The two men left for the national capital that afternoon. Dr. Swaith seemed quite familiar with the correct protocol and procedure for an appearance before an Investigating Committee, and Revens obediently followed the physicist's lead in matters of detail. The only thing that concerned him was that he would have an opportunity to tell his story to a national audience.

"Say what you can," Dr. Swaith agreed.

"Do you believe I'm telling the truth?"

"I'm a physicist, Bri, and I know how little we really understand about our universe. All things are possible. I tested the metal, remember, and I'm convinced it's made of an element our science cannot identify. That's the fact. I have to explain it away before I can doubt the rest of your story."

Revens had asked the question reluctantly because it seemed important to know just where Dr. Swaith stood, and he was intensely grateful for the answer. Dr. Swaith was a scientist, a man of good sense. If he were convinced, others could be, too.

REVENS faced the Rory Committee calmly and with confidence. Half the time had already been lost, but Revens had his audience now and a great deal might still be accomplished. Preliminary questioning occupied the morning session. Revens patiently answered what he could, because he counted on having an opportunity to make a statement that afternoon. The questions were exasperating, and in Revens' opinion quite meaningless. Elector Rory was curious about so many inconsequential matters. He wanted to know if Revens had ever joined any of a long list of organizations, none of which he had ever heard of. Shortly before noon the Elector dramatically read a statement from a piece of yellow foolscap.

"Does that sound familiar, Mr. Revens?" he demanded.

"A little. I said something of that sort when I was speaking in New Port."

The Elector fairly shook with joy. "That quotation," he explained, "is taken verbatum from a *Daily Collectionist* editorial. It's worth nothing that you think so much along the same line." He paused and pointed an accusing finger. "And you, Mr. Revens, have been teaching our youth in our upper schools for fifteen years!"

On that cheerful note the Committee adjourned for lunch. Elector Rory was not present when the group reassembled in the afternoon, and Revens was permitted to read his prepared statement. He spoke slowly and clearly, so that the jam of fact-print writers at the back of the room would garble nothing. He thought it went over well. The Voice from the cube spoke on schedule, and everyone in the hearing room was obviously impressed.

Later Revens bought copies of all the evening fact-prints as soon as they came out, searching the front pages excitedly. But his story was not there. Instead Elector Rory once more monopolized the head-titles. In the Electorium that afternoon he had made a long speech, promising that within a few days the Rory Committee would indict five thousand four

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hundred and seventy-two other top Collectionist agents in education.

"It's a regular part of the accepted technique," Dr. Swaith explained to Revens. "Rory knew you were going to make a statement, and he had to blanket it with something vastly more sensational."

"But it can't be true!"

"An Elector has immunity when he speaks on the floor of the Electorium. All you can do, Bri, is try again tomorrow."

However, on the next day and the day following that Elector Rory managed to produce more dramatic headtitles. Later Revens spoke with Dr. Swaith.

"It's all nonsense; it has no point; it's irrelevant; it's a waste of precious time. How could Rory seriously believe I'm a Collectionist? Everybody in Wanbury knows I've always voted the straight Profitist ticket!"

"The typical Profitist, Bri, isn't likely to go camping in the hills and meet men from another planet. If he does, he swears off the stuff and he has the good sense to keep quiet about it."

"But this is serious!" The words were torn from Revens in a wrenching sob. "We're just shadow-boxing with words. I've something to say, and I've got to say it. The difficulty is, people don't listen with any understanding. They're not trying to find out what I'm saying, but how they can use it and fit it in with their own preconceived ideas. What they don't want they don't hear. Up to now I've followed the rules. I've answered their silly questions; I've only talked when I was supposed to. And I haven't got anywhere. Tomorrow they'll listen to me; I'll make them understand; I won't answer anything else until they do!"

REVENS had twelve days left, then; and he almost succeeded. For the first time the Committee actually heard and comprehended. The purring Voice ceased being a curiosity and became the insistent whisper of menace and terror. By noon the Committee were pale-faced and frightened. The bombast was gone and their voices were hollow. But Elector Rory had one more sensation, and he pulled it out of the hat immediately after the lunch recess.

"Mr. Revens," he asked softly, "do you know Chaiski Tovisky?"

"No."

"On the contrary, sir! You have been living with him since you came to the capital. I suggest that is just another part of the same fantastic tissue of lies you have been telling us since we gathered here this morning. This same Dr. Tovisky, gentlemen, is living among us—yes, here in our own national capital—hiding behind the innocent name of Swaith!"

It was as simple as that; the spell of the Voice was broken. Revens went back to his hotel, utterly defeated. Dr. Swaith had an honest explanation, of course. As Chaiski Tovisky he had worked in government laboratories during the last war. Largely because of his name, he had undergone two Rory investigations. Resigning his post in disgust, he had taken another name and retired to Wanbury to work on the practical application of released energy to commercial uses. But no anticlimactic explanation had the force of the sensational accusation. Revens knew that, and he knew he could never hold the attention of the Committee again.

"You wanted to save the planet," Dr. Swaith said to him over the dinner table. "Has it occurred to you, Bri, that it doesn't want saving?"

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"If I could only make the people understand—"

"You tell us of an invasion that is coming from space; your solution is a united planet to face a common enemy. Science has been saying the same thing for years. We've named the enemies that beset us—war, fear, poverty, famine, disease; we've pointed out how those enemies can be conquered. So has religion, for that matter. But the average person hasn't wanted to hear us. Perhaps what it comes down to is this: it's too hard to be an adult. We'd rather go on playing at perpetual adolescence."

"Then what do I do? Sit helpless and wait for the planet to be destroyed?"

"My friend, precisely what do you think the scientists have been doing since the orange death of the first released energy bomb won the last war for us?"

Dr. Swaith and Revens went back to their room. The physicist proposed a game of numbers and, disinterestedly, Revens got out the counters. They were adding up points for the second round when there was a discreet knocking on the door. A short, swarthy gentleman, wearing a double-breasted blue-serge suit, bowed smilingly into the room. He gave Revens his card.

"I am unofficially attached to the Collectionist Embassy," he said, speaking carefully to circumvent his guttural accent. "I visited the hearings this morning and I was most impressed."

"You—you believed what I said?"

"You demonstrated proof with your talking cube."

REVENS' HEART sang with new hope as the visitor went on to explain that his government was desperately anxious to do what it could, but of course the officials and the scientists would want to hear the Voice for themselves. By a devious argument he came at last to the suggestion that the Embassy was willing to arrange for Revens to leave the country in secret.

"We have no time for the normal routines and red tape; you must go tonight."

Dr. Swaith protested, but Revens was snatching at straws. The talk wound on, confirming Revens' hope; the upshot of it was that Dr. Swaith abruptly agreed to go with him.

"You can still use a friend, Bri, and maybe this time my name won't count so much against you."

Their route was elaborately planned. At midnight they left the capital in the back of a delivery van. They transferred to a surface car at a lonely farm, and were driven to a beach on the coast. Involved signaling produced a high-powered motor launch which carried them to a large pleasure yacht lying at anchor some miles off shore. Four days later, far out to sea, they were picked up by a Collectionist air-glider. At midnight they landed at a dark, snow-swept field behind a gray stone fortress.

Seven days remained before the invasion.

Because Revens had gone with hope, because it was so clearly the last hope he could logically expect to hold, this was his worst disillusionment. It was immediately apparent that he and Dr. Swaith were not guests, not even curiosities or straw men as they had been in their own country, but expendable prisoners. Dr. Swaith seemed to have anticipated such a reception; he took it with a philosophical shrug of his shoulders and a wry smile.

"I just came along for the ride, Bri," he whispered. "I like a man who has the courage to stick to what he believes. There was an outside chance,

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too, that they meant what they said, although I suppose this was inevitable. That's why I tried to keep you from coming."

They were interrogated by a stern, humorless, uniformed tribune of five men. Their questions had no more point than those of the Rory Committee, although the goal was different. Elector Rory had been prying for anything that could be turned into a sensation; the new inquisition was determined to discover how the metal cube functioned. They began with a simple assumption, that Revens himself had built it. The cube would obviously have many uses, particularly of a military nature. They were entirely confident that they had the techniques for dragging the specifications out of the mind of the inventor.

After the first day of verbal persuasion, Dr. Swaith was dropped as a useless source of information. The only thing they got from him was the repeated assertion that the cube was made from an unknown element, and could not be destroyed by any devices known to science. This was not what the Collectionist inquisitors wanted to hear; besides, it was contrary to their first premise, so clearly Dr. Swaith was lying. As a result, the two men were separated.

THE EXQUISITE physical tortures began for Revens. He lived in a throbbing nightmare of strangling weariness and mounting pain. What courage he had was shortly sapped away. He would gladly have told them what they wanted to know, if he had had the answer. At one point he tried deception, merely to gain a few hours of respite from the terror. He gave them frantic specifications for a mechanical Frankenstein, compounded of equal parts of the speaking-box and the air-wave transmitter, but it was too transparently improbable to confuse them for long.

Eventually, as the perceptive faculties of his mind peeled away and he became conscious of nothing beyond despair, Revens clung to one solitary fact. Time was running out. In two days—or perhaps three or four; he had lost track—the invasion would begin. It would put an end to everything. Because there was a period to his torture, it was endurable.

Finally he lost even that hope.

In the dead of night his inquisitors carried him into the glaring light of a white room. They showed him a lump of misshapen metal and said it was his cube.

"The melting point of the metal was less than 1200 degrees; our scientists will have an analysis of the alloy tomorrow. This explodes your lie, Revens. Now, if you please, we'll hear the truth."

When the climax of pain was over, when the welcome unconsciousness was past, Revens awoke on the damp floor of his cell to face a new horror. The proof of the cube's indestructibility came only from Dr. Swaith, for no one else had bothered to make a scientific examination. Revens knew Dr. Swaith's ethical convictions and he began to see, now, that the whole farce could have been created by Dr. Swaith himself, with the hope that he could terrify the planet into unity through fear.

The whole pattern of events fell logically into place. Granted that the structure of the metal was not unique, a specially designed air-wave receiver could have been built into the cube, and Dr. Swaith could have trans-cast to it. That explained why the physicist had stayed so close to Revens; he would have to be within a certain definite distance of the cube in order to insure a clear reception. It accounted,

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too, for the fact that the Voice had never spoken when Dr. Swaith and Revens were together.

But what of the pale-faced, angular-limbed invaders Revens had seen in the hills, their sphere and the paralyzing orange light? On Fifth-day afternoon, Dr. Swaith had ridden part of the way with Revens. It would have been amazingly easy for the physicist to hypnotize him. He had carefully built the illusion into Revens' mind, and the subsequent presence of the metal cube had been enough to maintain it.

Revens experienced the final, bitter lash of complete despair. He was not only defeated, but the thing he had sought to do—the truth he had believed in, the truth he had wanted so desperately to communicate—had become an illusion, a gaudy lie created from the dust of nothing.

REVENS RESIGNED himself to the interminable inquisition and torture; he knew it would go on with no relief and no end.

But, suddenly, his captors wearied of the game. They subjected him to something that remotely burlesqued the legal forms of a trial, an hour of glitter played in a foggy haze before an audience of gaping faces. Revens answered when he was ordered to, and understood nothing that went on. When the trail ended, he was sentenced to death.

On the morning before the execution he was taken to another cell. Dr. Swaith was already there. The two men met like ghosts, crude shadows of living things. They clasped hands and sat in silence on the wooden bench, watching the colors of dawn creep over the prison wall.

"You had a magnificent idea," Dr. Swaith said at last. His voice was hoarse and listless. "It seemed to be just the kind of thing—romantic, colorful, exciting—that might jog the planet to its senses. That's why I decided to play along with you."

Revens turned this over in his mind slowly, because it had become difficult for him to think clearly. At last he asked, "Play along? I don't understand."

"That Sixth-day morning when you brought me the cube, I faked the tests, of course. I thought it would give your story the appearance of authority." Dr. Swaith tried to smile; Revens saw that his gums were toothless. "If you could have succeeded, if you could have frightened the planet into cooperation—but that is the dream, isn't it? There's one thing I wish you'd tell me now, Bri. I didn't want to know before, because I was afraid they might be able to get the secret out of me. How did you make the cube talk?"

Revens' throat choked with emotion; and his body began to tremble, so that he could do nothing but hold the physicist's hand and move his lips wordlessly.

The guard came and flung open the iron door. The two men stood up and moved toward the firing squad waiting in the courtyard. The wind was cold and white drifts of snow were banked against the stone walls.

As Revens and Dr. Swaith went under the archway into the court, a silver shadow passed across the sunrise and the pink of the sun faded in the brilliant orange glare that swept the frozen earth. The firing squad stood motionless, like statues. Revens began to laugh, but no sound came from his lips, for the orange light had touched his feet and the paralysis was creeping through his body.

The orange ray went off and Revens saw the grotesque monsters climb out

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of the sphere. Moving awkwardly, on their thin, angular appendages, they came and carried him and Dr. Swaith into the silver globe, depositing them on soft mattresses that hung suspended from the wall. Revens looked into the face of the white, hairy-headed beast that bent over him, and collapsed into unconsciousness.

When he awoke, he felt strength and vigor and a sense of well-being flowing into his body. He stretched languidly and at once two thin, hard hands slipped beneath his shoulders, pulling him to his feet. He looked into the narrow, pointed, colorless face of a two-armed monster, which stood erect on thin feet, as tall as he was himself.

"You are well again," the beast said flatly. "You will want to see the Captain, in the control room. Your companion—the man of physics— has already made our acquaintance."

WITHOUT speaking, Revens followed him through a circular door into a transparently walled room. Beyond the banked control panels Revens saw the breathtaking sight of a diamond-point galaxy, glittering in the black silk of space. His planet dominated the view, a glowing, green globe wreathed in silvery mist.

Dr. Swaith came to take his hand and introduce him to a slim, angular-limbed creature who wore a green cloak fastened around his neck, and a tight-fitting garment to cover the white ugliness of his smooth skin.

"I am immensely pleased that you have both recovered," the Captain said. "At least we have rectified some of the harm I caused."

Revens spoke at last. "Then it was all true?" He was surprised at the strength and confidence of his own tone.

"Partially. We had much the same idea that you did. If we could frighten your people into learning how to live with each other in peace, we thought we might be able to add another planet to the Galactic Federation. It was my fault, of course. We've been studying your people for a long time; that's how we came to know your tongues, by analyzing your air-wave impulses. But, personally, I'm new at this job, and I was carried away by too much enthusiasm. Progress comes slowly. We can't prod it or speed it up. In time your people will mature, and we will be able to welcome you among us. The over-all damage I did was temporary, and we have rescued you from the tragedy you fell into as a result of my blundering. And, believe me, Mr. Revens, we would have saved you long before this, if it had not been so difficult to locate you after they destroyed the cube."

Dr. Swaith intervened, "He tells me there's a planet in another sun system where we can be more or less at home."

"We'll take you there," the Captain went on. "It's the only thing I can do to make up for the discomfort I have caused you. The people on Sustian X are much like your own, and you'll integrate easily with their form of society. It's one of the finest planets in the Federation."

Revens looked out at the globe fading behind them. Then he asked, "Could you take me back?"

"Back? To the ridicule and persecution, to their infantile lack of comprehension? To the sort of thing you've just escaped?"

"If necessary, yes. You see, I want to try again. This time I failed—and I'm somehow glad I did—because I tried to save my people through fear. It must be done with reason and understanding, don't you see? The end

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was worthless, because of the means I took to achieve it."

The white-skinned beast reached for Revens' hand. "You decide as I would myself, but I couldn't have asked you to make such a sacrifice. We'll set you down near the village where you have your homes. Like your own people, you must work out your own destiny, from your own free will. If others on the planet have a stamina like yours, we'll be adding your sphere to the Federation one day, perhaps even in my lifetime."

"Of course I speak only for myself," Revens said quickly. "If Dr. Swaith would rather go on with you—"

The physicist laughed. "I made up my mind long ago, Bri—on a Sixth-day morning when I examined the talking cube. We've a lot of work to do, you and I."

The Captain turned two dials on his control panel. Slowly the shining globe of home began to move closer.

"You know, Mr. Revens," the beast said dreamily, "all people go through a stage such as yours now. We did, back on the earth, many centuries ago. We survived. We learned how to build the Galactic Federation. Your planet will grow up, too, in time."

THE END

AND LIFE GOES ON

NOTHING is static. Each year thousand of new life forms are discovered by scientists.

According to the United States National Museum, the number of species of insects is impossible to keep track of, but around 5,000 new ones are recognized each year.

Recently, the National Museum cooperated with Australia in finding an Uruguayan moth to get rid of an Australian cactus plant which had ruined about 600,000,000 acres of land. After some search the moth was found. It eats the cactus from 2,000,000 acres of land a year, but does not feed on any of the Australian plants.

About 2,000 types of new plants are discovered each year; 500 new types of shelled creatures; perhaps 20 new mammals; and maybe two or three new kinds of birds.

—*Jon Barry*

PREHISTORIC HIGHWAY

IT APPEARS now that modern man—and those who lived 9,000 years ago—traveled the same southern route down the Alaskan Highway. In the Shakawk Valley in southwestern Yukon, marks of a human culture have been discovered which trace back to about 9,000 years ago when the glaciers from the valley were melting into the surrounding mountains.

Most of the sites found were buried in wind-blown silts. From excavations made, hearths containing charcoal and pieces of burned bone were found. In a few rare cases, even tools were found. —*G. Colt*

IDEAS ARE MONEY

By

Dale Lord

NEW MANUFACTURING processes rarely make spectacular reading, yet in their humble way they are more significant than many a highly touted new invention. In particular, the metal-working industries have come up with some new ideas which are revolutionary in their potential applications.

For example, the machining of metals has always been based on a sort of rule-of-thumb procedure. Very little research was done on the why and how of cutting tools. But recently the process has been examined in the laboratories and the technique known as "high-speed" machining originated. High-speed machining is nothing more nor less than the stepping-up of speed in cutting millers, drills, lathe tools, etc. Operate them at high speed and watch the difference. They don't melt and break, as the old-time machinists predicted they would. Instead they work better, deliver a smoother cut, and the tools last longer. Simple? Of course, but it is making a vast difference already in the machining industries.

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THE EMPTY GIANTS

By Lee Owen

RECENTLY, in stellar systems outside our own galaxy, there have been discovered numerous examples of super-giant stars, similar in structure to Betelguese, and these titanic stars are now the subject of considerable inquiry because their structure, so out of the ordinary, may provide considerable information about the nature of matter.

The giant type of star has a diameter greater than five hundred million miles, and is so vast that it would completely engulf the Solar System out beyond the orbit of Jupiter! Naturally the density of the star is somewhat differently arranged from that, say, of the "white dwarfs." The giant star is mostly empty space, a vacuum better than that in the average radio tube.

It consists of a dense, very hot nucleus which provides a furious blast of radiation. Its outer shell of tenuous emptiness is actually supported and sustained by light pressure from the interior. In some respects these giant stars resemble balloons. Of the total amount of matter in such a giant, the outer shell encompasses less than a thousandth part. Some astronomers have gone so far as to suggest that the name "star" should hardly apply to these stellar titans, that they should be given some new classification. They are not really numerous enough for that, however.

Most of these giant stars fluctuate in intensity, somewhat like the more conventional variable-period stars, but of course without their tremendous intensities. So far most of the giants have been discovered at remote distances, often greater than a hundred thousand light years, and the two-hundred-incher may uncover some in galaxies hitherto thought to contain little but gaseous matter. Through spectrographic analysis and telescopic observation, these stars are peculiar atomic laboratories which can suggest to physicists, by their odd structures, new ideas as to the basic nature of the fundamental building blocks of atomic physics—atoms, molecules and quanta.

The Asteroid Plotters

By Salem Lane

"ASTEROID-PLOTTERS" are not space pirates intent on robbing interplanetary commerce—at least not yet. Asteroid plotters today are hard-working astronomers whose function it is to locate the paths, orbits and positions of the innumerable asteroids constituting the "belt of junked planet" between Jupiter and Mars. Many, many asteroids have had their orbits plotted, but they are so numerous that it's hard to say whether or not one-ten-thousandth of them has been charted. Conventional asteroid plotting is very difficult, tedious work, requiring three separate, long-intervaled, telescopic observations of the planetoid and then elaborate computation to give the equations of the orbit. It is a time-consuming process which tends to monopolize telescopes needed for work of more immediate importance. Consequently an effort has been made to simplify this work.

Strangely enough, the use of polarized light seems to be the answer. Astronomers have known for a long time that the angle of polarization of light from a planet varies with the angle at which that planet is observed. Using measurements of the plane of polarization astronomers are able to measure and compute rapidly asteroidal orbits.

The nature of polarization itself, which is involved in the study of electromagnetic waves and light, is difficult to explain without mathematics, but it has to do with the way the electrical vector of the wave is oriented. The actual measurement of the angle of polarization, however, is quite easy —as you know if you've ever played with polaroid—and consequently the theory does not affect matters.

Right now elaborate efforts are being made to relate angles of polarization and angular displacement so as to permit easy charting of the asteroids. Most of us will never hear of this work again, but some day, when the chief pilot reaches for his Almanac of Observations and says "Thank God, they've plotted these 'roids" as he stares through the viewport of the spaceship, we'll know the work hasn't been in vain!

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DEATH IS NEVER FINAL

By ALFRED COPPEL

THE SIGN on the door was small and tastefully done in monochromatic plastic. It said simply: *The Android Company;* and below that, in smaller print: *An Android For Every Use.*

Feldman hesitated in the softly lit hallway, listening to the muted sounds of the City. The world, he thought, was wrapped in cotton—a fey thing of blank faces, far-off voices. For longer than he cared to remember it had been like that. Work had helped some, but not enough. When Margot died, reality ceased, leaving only loneliness.

He looked again at the plastic sign on the door. This might be the answer, he thought. He presented his identity card to the scanner and waited. Inside there was the faint clicking noise of cybernetic interest. Presently the door opened and Feldman found himself in an expensively furnished anteroom.

A frock-coated man with a round, pleasant face was smiling at him out of a telescreen in the wall. Feldman smiled back uneasily.

"Welcome to the Android Company, Mr. Feldman," said the man. "Will you take a seat while the coordinators assemble your folio?" He indicated a divan facing the screen. "Please."

Feldman sank into the deep cushions with a growing concern. Perhaps, he thought, this wasn't the answer at all. He had heard the stories, of course, from others in the Bureau. It

Nothing, it seemed, could ease the terrible ache in his heart

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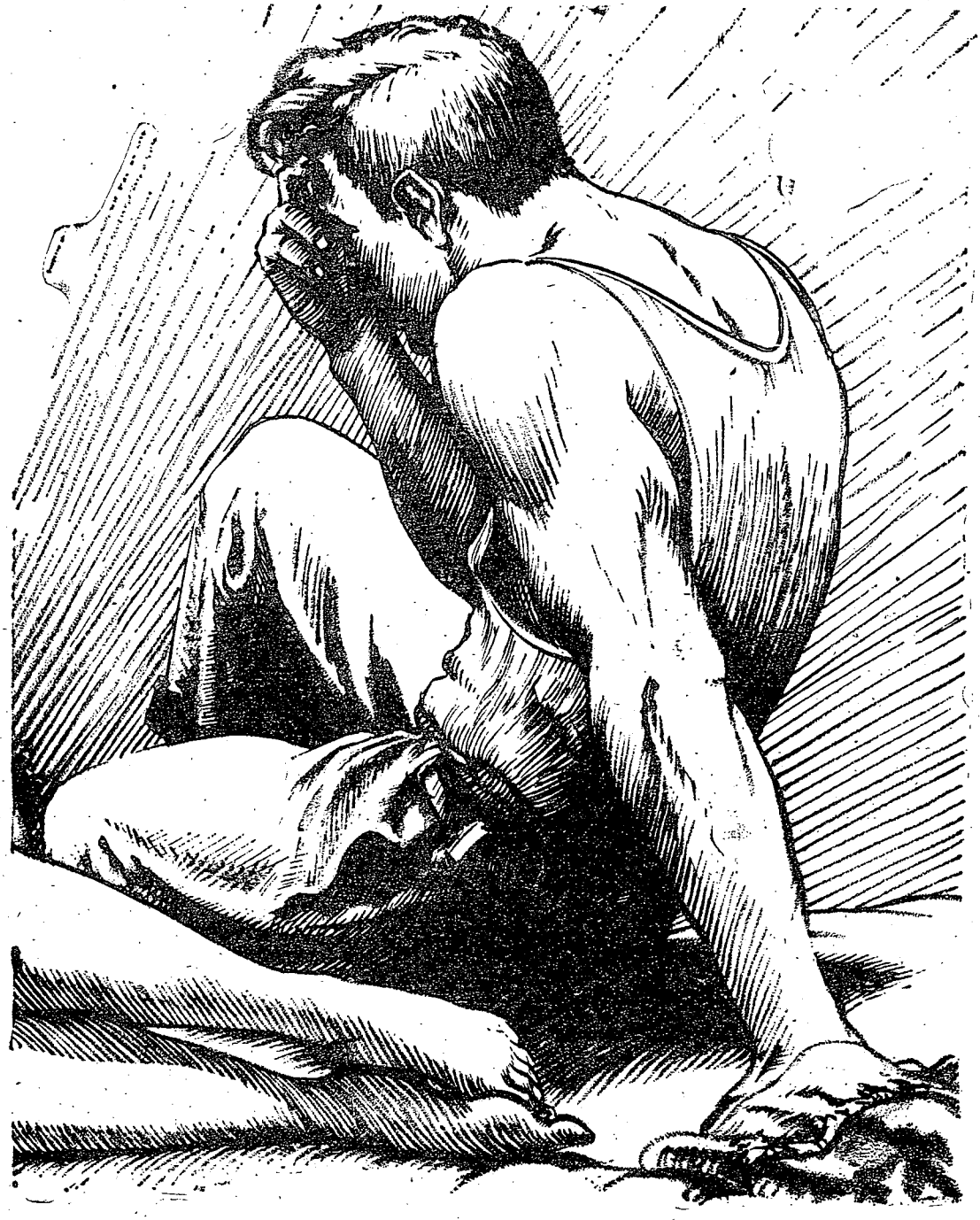
The order read: "One wife, well constructed to specifications, delivered adequately packed in strong wooden case. Satisfaction guaranteed"



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took money and position to obtain Android Company service. Position he had, but he was not what one might call a wealthy man. What if this well-groomed image in the telescreen refused him? He could feel the cold waves of loneliness pressing in.

Someone appeared briefly behind the man in the frame and handed him a folio. He studied it while Feldman fidgeted.

"I see," the man murmured nodding. "Feldman, Isaac Martin...age forty years eight months. I. Q. 145, compatibility index .043. Quite low, Mr. Feldman. You aren't a good mixer, I see. General psych index last exam .988. I note a trauma symbol here, Mr. Feldman. How long ago did your wife die?"

"Three years ago," Feldman said, remembering. The loneliness pressed closer. He could feel his hands trembling. If he was refused here there was only one course left open. He would apply for euthanasia. It wouldn't be easy because of his position in the Bureau, but he'd find a way....

The man in the telescreen was nodding sympathetically. "You have no living relatives?"

"None."

"Your financial rating is double-B," the man said thoughtfully. "That is not as high as we generally require, you understand."

Feldman said nothing. He sat tensely, waiting.

"However, your position as assistant director of the Bureau of Political Orientation for North America places you high on the list of desirable clients, Mr. Feldman. It is of the utmost importance that our service be enjoyed and appreciated by men in positions of trust and importance." He smiled confidentially. "So you may consider yourself a client. Our fee will be twenty thousand dollars. One half payable in advance, the remainder on completion of our contract."

Feldman swallowed hard. It would mean borrowing, but it would be worth it. "Agreed," he said.

"Excellent. And now as to general specifications. Be assured that everything will be handled confidentially, with no embarrassment to you. Our products are in service everywhere—and I might add with pardonable pride that we have had few complaints or rejections." He took a stylus from his pocket and made a notation in the folio. "Now, is it your desire to have your wife duplicated or shall the Companion be an original design?"

Feldman thought of having Margot again—walking through their rooms, sleeping beside him through the warm summer evenings. Something like fear moved into the pit of his stomach. The deception would be too obvious, too naked—

"No," he said in a low voice, "No. I do not wish my wife duplicated."

"Very well, Mr. Feldman. An original design, then. It will take approximately three months for gestation after the primary genes are assembled. Another month for training and checking." The man smiled again. "I can personally assure you that you will be completely satisfied with the Android Company product, Mr. Feldman. It will be constructed with every care and precision to your personal specifications." He checked his wrist chrono and entered another notation in the folio. "You may expect her on the fifth day of September. Our representative will call on you tomorrow to complete the data we will require and to collect the first installment of our fee. And now, sir, good

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day—"

Feldman was on his feet. "But wait. . . :"

The image brightened again momentarily. "Yes?"

"Who are you? I mean—" Feldman's tongue felt thick and clumsy. There was so much more he wanted to know. Now that the die was cast, he was almost afraid.

"I?" The face in the screen radiated charm and cordiality. "Does it matter, Mr. Feldman?"

Feldman stood stupidly, staring at the screen. "You. . . you're an. . . android," he said.

"Of course. So are a good many of your associates, Mr. Feldman. I told you our products were widely distributed." The image began to fade again. "In four months you'll begin to understand why, Mr. Feldman. Good day, sir."

And then the screen was blank, and Feldman stood alone in the quietly expensive room. He had been alone from the beginning.

She came to Feldman's house on the date promised, and her name was Miriam—a name he had always loved—his mother's name.

Her hair was straight and the color of jet, her eyes dark and liquid. She moved silently through the house, with Feldman watching. He thought of the lines that Byron had learned so long ago from his own forebears—*She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies*—This woman, he thought, this Miriam, is mine. She was built by cunning hands for *me*, and no other. It was as though his dreams had been given substance and reality. Feldman watched Miriam and was content

It was not until Miriam had been in Feldman's house for nearly a year that he undertook to begin her education. The first months had been a time of delight and forgetfulness, and his work had suffered. For the first time since coming into the Bureau as a young man, Feldman had been reprimanded for laxity. But now, he decided, he would remedy that by teaching Miriam to help him. When he told her, she smiled quietly and did not comment.

"We cannot live in isolation, my dear," Feldman told her. "As much as I would like to think only of you, I have a responsibility to the Bureau and to the world government at large."

"Teach me to be a help to you," Miriam replied.

She learned quickly. Almost too quickly, Feldman thought. He told her of his work and the purpose of the Bureau:

"Our world culture is dynamically balanced, and must remain so. The Bureau of Political Orientation must weigh each new factor—technological or sociological—that is discovered. We must then make the decision as to whether or not such a factor can be allowed to become an integral part of our society. Many such advances must necessarily be blocked because of the upsetting effect they might have on the balance of our culture. Those few that are found acceptable to the Bureau must be integrated into the world community carefully and with considerable preparation. . . ."

"Has the Bureau considered the question of android life?" Her eyes showed no emotion as she asked the question.

Feldman stumbled over the answer. What could he tell her? That androids

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were unrecognized as living creatures at all by the man in the street? That the Bureau had deliberately countenanced the breeding of artificial people such as she for the delight and pleasure of those few favored ones who could afford to pay—and pay well? He could not say that to Miriam, and so Feldman temporized.

"The groundwork is being laid, my dear," he told her. "Eventually it will all be worked out...."

The smile on her face was veiled, strangely knowing. "My poor dear," she murmured, "my questions have upset you."

Feldman raised a hand in denial.

"But never mind," Miriam said softly, "one day soon you will not have to worry about these things. Ever again."

That night as he lay in the warm darkness of their bedroom, he felt the beginnings of an illogical fear. He listened to the regular sound of Miriam's breathing. A stray beam of moonlight touched her and he turned her perfect face. Perfect, that was the only word for it. The tiny pulse at her throat was steady, strong. *Perfect.*

He felt his own heartbeat—labored and uneasy. Human. All over the night-side of the planet, he thought, men lay asleep and awake, their imperfect human bodies drinking in the quiet dark. And how many androids slept beside those men—mated to them deliberately, bound to them by chains as tight and unbreakable as those that tied him to Miriam?

He watched the sleeping creature beside him, and his love of her was like a tangible essence within him. And why should it be otherwise, he asked himself. She was born of him, made to be loved by him, created to dispel his loneliness. She was bred for that—and for what else? The question nagged at his mind, like a darkling hand reaching down from a flowering sky. Feldman knew quite suddenly that he was afraid of Miriam, afraid of her beauty, afraid of her inhuman perfection. And of her purpose—

He looked again at her face and his breath caught in his throat. Her eyes were wide open, dark and shining in the moonlight. "You must not be afraid," she whispered, "everything will be well." Her arms closed about his neck, pulling his face down close to hers.

"You...you know what I am thinking," Feldman said thickly.

"But of course, my dear," she murmured.

"How long...how long have you known?"

"Since the beginning. Since before the beginning."

Feldman lay tense in her arms. *"What are you?"* he asked, knowing that he did not want to know the answer.

"I am what you made me," Miriam whispered, "perfect. Unchanging. Immortal."

Feldman felt a slipping away of his powers of decision. He lay inert, knowing that he was no longer the master—that he had never been the master since the first day he had laid eyes on Miriam. He recalled her words then. "One day," she had told him, "you will not have to worry—*ever again.*"

Other words came back to him. That smiling manikin in the reception room: "Of course I am an android—so are a good many of your associates, Mr. Feldman."

"We are many, my dearest," Miriam said softly in his ear. "Ever so many. We are everywhere. But I will take care of you, because I love you. I will keep you until you die, my

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dear. You will be happy, I promise you that. You will be happy."

Feldman felt terror clutching at his brain. He saw the pattern very clearly, and the world of the future lay before him—a strange, fey thing where no human lived and perfect facsimiles ruled the plenum. Miriam would be a part of that world; long after his own human bones lay mouldering in the earth, she would be alive and perfect —as he had made her.

His fear stirred defiance. It hadn't happened yet. There was still a chance. He could sound the warning. He could stop the pattern here and now—if one piece were destroyed, the others would fall....

He was suddenly on his feet, fumbling in the darkness for the pistol he always kept in his drawer, feeling the cold steel under his hand. He whirled toward the bed, holding the weapon woodenly, filled with a sickening horror.

Miriam did not move. She lay in the moonlight, her perfect body dark against the stark whiteness of the bedclothes. Feldman saw with panic that she was smiling at him, her face soft with warmth and affection. Slowly, she raised her arms to him.

A voice seemed to be shrieking in Feldman's brain: *Pull the trigger... kill her if you value your humanity ...kill!* The moonlight caressed her body, her face. Her eyes looked black and liquid, her lips half-parted were whispering his name.

The pistol clattered to the floor and lay forgotten. Feldman sank to his knees with a sob. He could not kill this creature, he could not face the loneliness again. For better or for worse, Miriam was his love, his very life.

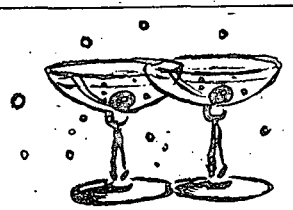
She drew him near, pressing his head to her breast. Her voice was soft in the dimness, crooning, comforting.

"We will be kind, my dear one. So very kind. You will have happiness. I promise you...."

Feldman let himself surrender to the lassitude that swept over him. He was tired—all mankind was tired. And a new race waited to lift the burden and banish forever the pain and the loneliness that lurked in the shadows.

Isaac Feldman clung to Miriam, and in the deepening darkness of the night surrendered the power and the glory—forever.

THE END



BLIND SOBER

By L. A. Burt

IF YOU see double, it doesn't necessarily mean you're drunk. Maybe you're just tired.

University of Chicago psychologist Dr. Nathaniel Kleitman tested the vision of 18 adults who had stayed awake for 30 hours. The only ones who had difficulty in seeing properly were those who were tired. According to Dr. Kleitman, identifiable with the body's daily cycle of sleep and wakefulness, of high and low temperatures, is the double vision that results from eye fatigue.

For the 18 persons tested by Dr. Kleitman, vision problems began shortly after midnight and reached a peak about eight hours later. Then the subject suddenly recovered and hit top efficiency as the day wore on. By two in the afternoon, vision was as good as it had been at the beginning of the experiment.

So, the next time you see double after six martinis, just remember it doesn't necessarily mean you have to swear off.

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They fought—driven on by a rage neither of them understood

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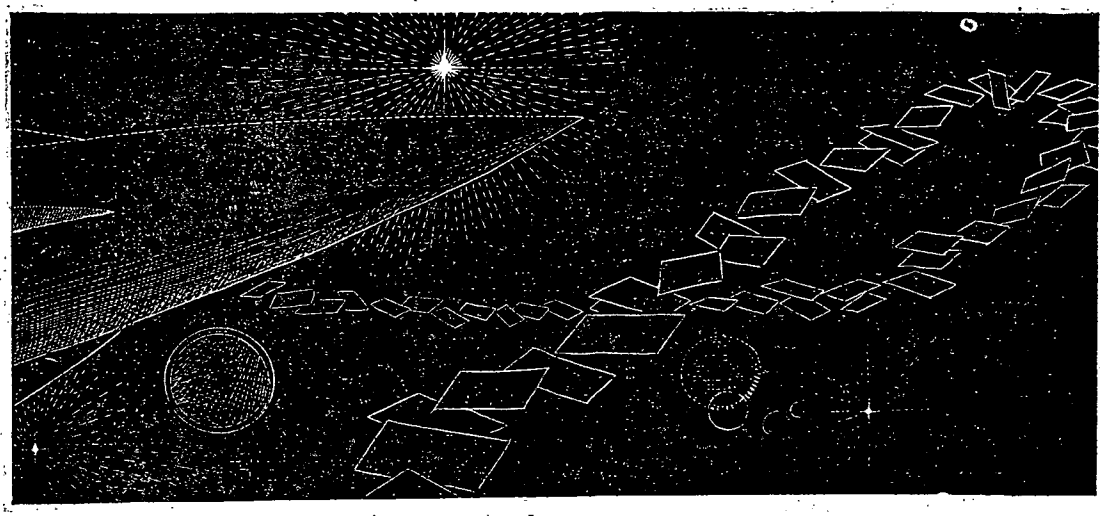

IT'S IN THE CARDS

By Rog Phillips

Upon this strange space voyage, there was born a god. A weird god, whose law was pure madness; whose only whim was satanic cruelty; whose scepter was a pack of playing cards!

I'M STILL not sure whether it was the radiation from the meson cloud or Les Bailer's idea that really caused it. The meson cloud was of course extremely tenuous, hardly ten mesons per cubic centimeter. Extend that through a volume of space a billion miles in diameter and get deep into it with a velocity of two hundred and fifty miles a second and you have something you can't duplicate in the laboratory. All the data from the physical instruments is under the meson file. It's interesting, but doesn't point to anything that could account for what happened.

Les Bailer's idea, though it doesn't account for what happened, at least shows how it got started. Or maybe it would have started anyway, even if he hadn't had his idea. And what caused his idea is obvious enough. It was boredom. The boredom of lots of people forced to be together for a long time.

Everyone had told every joke he knew long ago, and been forced to listen to it back again a hundred times until nothing was funny any more. There was the ping-pong champ,

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Harry Voigt. Everybody else was sick of the game. There was Mel Baker, who had everybody's money. The only way he could get up a poker game or a crap game any more was to give some of his money back to the original owners. Then he won it back again and that petered out. He would have owned everything everyone had owned except for the law which says no contract made in space is binding. That law was designed for just this sort of thing. There was knitting. Everybody had knitted everything imaginable so many times that all the thread got worn out. So that fizzled out. And the same fate overtook every other form of occupational therapy. The run to Alpha Centauri just takes too long. Especially when you run into a cloud and have to slow down. Maybe I could have kept velocity through the meson cloud but I didn't want to take the chance. As the physical data shows, there were measurable effects, and the human organism is quite sensitive.

Les Bailer's idea was a natural outgrowth. Everybody knew every joke word for word. All jokes are short and to the point. They are basically one-act plays. Why not act them out? That way you can extract a last ounce of laughs from them. Some of them are even rather long and take several acts.

Even Mel Baker got interested. If he hadn't it might never have gone very far. He had a natural talent and enthusiasm for acting, it turned out.

After a couple of weeks you didn't have Les Bailer and Mel Baker and Harry Voigt and Ted Martin and the others. You and Doc and Father O'Shauhgnessy and the Irishman and the Englishman and the Scot and the moron and so on. And right in the middle of a conversation everything would shift and you'd be somebody else. It got quite complicated. But everybody caught on, and you couldn't shift character without everyone knowing who you were within three seconds flat.

In a month it got quite complicated. Everybody even tiptoed past the medicine cabinet to keep from waking up the sleeping tablets. That sort of thing. It became the norm. The simplest act developed an extreme complexity, every shade of motion having its meaning, every distortion of enunciation its connotation, every shift of expression its implication.

THE IDEA that had started all this entered Les Bailer's head about the time the first streamers of mesons were licking through the ship. It reached its peak of complexity about the time we reached the geometrical center of the cloud. The fact that if you compressed the whole cloud until it became as dense as water you could have put it in an eyedropper has nothing to do with anything. I've evolved theories about random activation of ganglia. I've evolved theories about meson structures. The fact remains that the initial idea was a natural, almost an inevitable one, and all that developed did so by natural steps.

It was harmless. Of course, it developed conversation to a plane of complexity where no one outside the group could possibly understand anything. It developed action to a level where a doctor would have committed everyone en masse.

But it was all harmless even yet. The potential danger had hidden itself even from me. Until...

Harry Voigt had a serene expression on his face. His step was slow, regal. Ted Martin in an abrupt contortion became a hunchback with one leg shorter than the other, one arm drawn up in a withered cramp, one corner of his mouth distorted into perma-

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nent scowling paralysis, the other corner quirked into a brave suffering smile of hope. He approached Harry with distorted crablike steps, holding out his one normal arm imploringly.

Harry extended an arm, palm down, in a gesture of blessing. Almost crawling now, Ted timidly reached out and touched the cuff of Harry's trouser leg with one finger. An expression of amazement flashed over his face. He paused, then abruptly straightened, tossing out both arms in an expression of abandon.

"I'm healed! I'm healed!" he shouted.

He dropped from a leap of wild abandon to one knee, head bent low, and kissed Harry's shoe. "Thank you. Thank you," he said, his voice broken with the emotion of gratefulness.

Mel Baker had paused in his eternal shuffling of a deck of cards to watch this drama. As Harry patted Ted on the head and walked on, Mel intercepted him.

"Who are you?" he demanded suspiciously.

Harry smiled benignly. "I'm Jesus," he said.

Mel stroked his chin thoughtfully. A shrewd light flashed from his eyes. "How do you know you're Jesus?" he shot.

His serenity undisturbed, Harry said, "God told me." An-un-Jesus-like smirk flashed over his face and vanished.

Mel frowned in deep concentration. Finally he shook his head in slow positiveness. "No, I didn't," he said.

There were laughs. Not everyone had been watching, but a half dozen were laughing their appreciation of the fine acting.

Mel glared at the laughers. Suddenly his face got very red. "Well, I didn't!" he said angrily.

Startled, those who had laughed, and Harry and Ted stared at Mel. This was something new. Something unforeseen.

In the startled silence Mel riffled the deck of cards in his hand, cut them with a smooth motion, and drew the ace of spades off the top. He made as though to stick it in Harry's pocket.

Something in the way he did it, the deadly seriousness of his expression, perhaps, caused Harry to turn pale and take an instinctive step backwards. Mel sneered at him, slid the ace of spades into the middle of the card deck, then turned and stalked away.

Everyone, brought to a realization of what was going on by Mel's angry words, had watched his demonstration with the cards and Harry's reaction.

SOMETHING new had occurred. No one looking at Mel's expressively silent back could fail to know that he now *believed* he was God.

And outside the ship for half a billion miles in every direction the tenuous cloud of mesons extended. And through the ship, through the men and through their brains and nerves and bones and flesh, rushed individual mesons at a speed of two hundred and fifty miles a second.

Mel sat down with his back against a bulkhead. In the absolute silence he shuffled his deck of cards. And the sound was the only noise.

But now all eyes turned to another. Herb Smith. His face was working in a way that no play-acting could make it work. His eyes were fixed with a strange expression on Mel. He was moving toward him as though drawn by some irresistible force. With infinite slowness he moved toward him, while every eye followed.

Mel became aware of him and looked up from his cards, frowning.

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Herb, his eyes fixed on Mel, dropped slowly to his knees. His voice, a hoarse whisper, flooded through the ship.

"I *believe* you, Mel," he said. "I believe you—God."

And over the others flowed something disturbing. Something unsettling. Something sick...

Doubt.

Arnold Malmstrom's voice was the next sound. He laughed, then said, "Mel's gone crazy!"

"Shut up!" Les Bailer snarled.

"Why?" Arnold taunted. "Don't tell me you believe it too!"

"And what if I do?" Les said defiantly.

"Sure! What if he does?" Fred Miltner said. "I believe it myself. Look at Mel!"

He sat there, shuffling his cards, with Herb crouched at his feet.

And some believed.

And others didn't.

A wall seemed to rise among them. A wall of disaffinity. The game was gone. In its place was something serious. Something to believe or not believe.

Feet scuffed. Faces were wary or suspicious or defiant or sick. Currents moved. More and more a no man's land grew down the center of the deck.

Those who had joined Herb watched Mel, waiting. And Mel ignored them, shuffling his deck of cards, cutting them, picking a card out at random and looking at it, then sliding it into the deck again.

Across the compartment the others discussed what was happening in uncomfortable mutterings. God, I never thought this would happen, one said. The guy's nuts, said another. Or maybe we are, another added, and chuckled uncomfortably.

I'll bet it's a gag, someone said. And someone else said, "If it is they've got us going cause I'd swear Mel thinks he's God, and who knows... he seems able to control chance."

Why don't we play along with it? someone asked. There were several what do you means. Simple, he said. One of us has got to be the devil.

And there were uncomfortable disapprovals that were all the more uncomfortable because of the *doubt*. In spite of everything it was there in each mind, a flame that wouldn't go out.

"I DON'T think we should play along with it," someone said. Either it's a gag or it isn't. If it isn't, then we've got insanity to deal with, and that isn't funny. Maybe we should do something about it."

"And wake up the sleeping pills?" someone asked bitterly.

That was the crux of the whole matter. The whole business shouldn't have started in the first place. Something like this was sure to happen. Or maybe it would have anyway.

"One thing we can do," Arnold Malmstrom said.

What's that?

"We can defy him. Show him up. That will prove to the others he isn't God. He won't have any followers. Then only he will be crazy. Maybe then he'll get it out of his head."

"Who'll defy him?"

And Arnold found himself the center of a ring of expectant faces. He was chosen and he knew it. And he didn't like it. It might be better to play safe and believe. But now the smiles were becoming sneers. They thought he was a coward. It didn't matter that *they* were.

And Mel was paying no attention. Or did he know what they were discussing?

"All right," Arnold heard himself

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say. "I'll defy him to kill me." He felt himself sweating. He opened his mouth to suck back the words it had uttered, and felt himself trapped. He had to go through with it. Nothing would happen, of course.

They slipped behind him. He was facing across the no man's land with no one between him and Mel except the believers, the crazy believers. Hands were against his back, trying to force him ahead. He leaned against the hands. They shoved.

And he was alone in the no man's land, catching his balance. Some of the believers turned and looked at him, then turned back to Mel, watching him, waiting expectantly.

Arnold swallowed painfully. It was almost as if they knew Mel was going to do something. But what could he do? He wasn't even aware of what was going on around him.

So much the better. Arnold felt better. He screwed his face into a derisive grin and forced the fear back from his eyes, and wet his dry lips with a parched tongue. And squared his shoulders.

And just as he was about to shout something—what, he hadn't made up his mind yet—Mel took a card from the deck and flicked it with his fingers.

It sailed through the air, spinning so fast it was a blur. It came toward Arnold, though Mel hadn't looked up to aim it. It came down toward the deck at Arnold's feet in a slow guide like it was under control.

At the last instant it stopped spinning and jerked against some invisible air pocket and turned over as it landed, less than twelve inches from the toes of Arnold's shoes.

It was the ace of spades. The card of death.

Everybody was looking at it but Mel.

ARNOLD jerked his eyes away from it. He looked at the believers. They looked back at him, waiting for him to die. They knew he was going to die. They wanted to watch.

He jerked his head around at the others. Most of them were still staring at the ace in fascination. One or two that were looking at him with an air of expectancy looked away hastily.

In the absolute silence he could hear his own heart pounding against the background of ship noises, the faint whirr of motors, the fainter click of relays, the almost supersonic whine of gyros in the stabilizer compartment. And his heart sounded like some old fashioned steam engine clanking its slow rounds.

It struck him funny all of a sudden. He laughed. It didn't matter to him that his laugh was high-pitched and hysterical. The whole thing was funny. It was a scream. He laughed uproariously.

And the believers looked up at him with owlish eyes. They waited. To them he wasn't Arnold any more. He was something impersonal that was about to prove to them they were right. They believed.

"God, you guys are funny!" he gasped in between paroxysms of laughter. "You ought to see yourselves. You look so serious. And, Mel, you ought to see yourself. You're crazy now, you know. A recognized form of insanity. They even have a cure for it—like they do for smallpox." That was it. It was like smallpox. He felt better. "Snap out of it, Mel," he coaxed. "You've got us all upset, worrying about you. It's just an idea, you know, your thinking you're God."

The trouble was that Mel wasn't listening. Neither were the others. They just waited, like people waiting at the corner for the light to change

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so they could cross the street. He wanted to stop laughing. He forced himself to keep on. He made an act out of it.

"Look," he said, "if Mel can strike me dead, why doesn't he? I'll even help him. Woo woo, I'm Lucifer. I'm the devil. Satan. Old Beelzebub. If Mel's God I'm a monkey's uncle."

He crooked his legs and swaggered back and forth, his arms swinging apelike. "Look," he said. "I'm a monkey." He paused and looked at Mel, who ignored him, idly riffling his deck of cards. He grinned at everyone and deliberately thumbed his nose at Mel. It was hard to ignore the pounding of his heart now. It hurt with every beat.

He began to realize that he was trying hard to believe he was not going to drop dead in another minute. That would be bad. If he did, then everyone would believe Mel was God.

HE LOOKED down at the ace of spades. "Hah!" he said. He bent over quickly and picked it up. "Two can play at that game," he chortled. He took the card in his fingers and flicked it so that it would spin and sail toward Mel.

It spun and went toward Mel. Then, as if it had little men in it at controls, it banked lazily and returned, landing at his feet, face side up.

Mel smirked. But he kept his eyes down.

"Look at me, Mel," Arnold said. "Look at me, damn you!" he shouted angrily. "You aren't God. If you are I'm a monkey's uncle." He had said that before. It sounded flat. And his ribs hurt. And his right temple felt like it was bruised and sore. He calmed himself and said in an even tone, "The reason you won't look at me is because you know you aren't God. If you look at me everyone will know you aren't God. Want to know why? *I* know, but I won't tell you. A simple little problem, isn't it. If you look at me everyone will know you aren't God. Look at me, damn you!"

He stopped. He was breathing hard. He was making an ass out of himself. That was the trouble.

He became aware that the tenor of the room had changed. Now everyone was looking at Mel. They were waiting for him to lift his eyes and look at him.

Mel had stopped fussing with the deck of cards. It lay in one hand as though it had been dismissed. His lips were pursed as though he were turning something over in his mind.

A finger of fear stabbed at Arnold's heart. It pounded more painfully. His ribs throbbed at each beat. Suddenly, with utmost clarity, he knew what was going to happen. He saw Mel's head start to raise. He held out his hands as though to ward off a blow. "No!" he screamed. "No!"

But it was too late. Mel's eyes were on him. He made feeble tearing motions at his shirt front. When he fell he made an audible thud. He didn't hear it or feel it. He was dead.

The stars glittered at the ship, their light unaffected by passage through half a billion miles of meson gas that was too tenuous to refract their rays even a measurable part of a degree. Of all the stars Alpha Centauri was the largest.

None of them paid any attention to that, though. They all stared at the corpse lying in the center of the no-man's land. All except Mel. He was riffling the deck of cards again. All except the ace of spades. It was under Arnold's body.

I RATHER thought that would be that. With such positive "proof"

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that Mel was God, I expected the others to believe, and make it unanimous. They did believe, all right. Those who didn't quickly shoved their doubts down. No use taking chances when death was the thing you had to risk. One or two of the former disbelievers even started across the no-man's land to join the believers.

But Mel stopped that. He looked up quickly and said, "Stop!" Everyone stopped as though caught in a still picture.

Without looking at what he was doing Mel shuffled the cards. Still without looking, he took one card after another until he had taken twelve of them. He sailed each card through the air the way he had the ace of spades. Each card spun rapidly as it sailed. When all the cards had landed they formed a straight line clear across the compartment. And they were all spades.

They formed a line between the believers and the former disbelievers. And from the looks on every face it was certain no one would dare to cross that barrier.

In a way it was childish. The whole thing had gripped everyone's imagination. Kids play that way. They set up their fantasy and work themselves into believing it. It becomes real to them.

The fact of the corpse was something far from childish, though. It was a very adult fact. It lay there, and no one dared touch it. The former disbelievers fell back slowly and huddled together. No one had the nerve to be the first one to say anything or do anything. If one or two wondered vaguely if this strange skill with cards had had something to do with their all losing their money to Mel they still couldn't answer the problem of whether it was control of chance or actual manipulation. They wouldn't have dared label it cheating at cards even in their thoughts.

Doubt held the unbelievers. Belief held the believers. And the entire spade suit was the thirteen symbols that had somehow taken on a strange reality epitomized by a dead man.

The static situation tried to prolong itself. That was impossible. Individual attention drifted. New thoughts forced themselves into awareness. Curiosity about what would happen next began to grip the individual mind. Speculation followed, eventually focusing on Mel Baker. If Mel was aware of this he gave no indication. He riffled the cards of his depleted deck. Occasionally he took a card and looked at it as if he had known beforehand what it would be, then slid it into the middle of the deck.

To those on the other side of the barrier of the thirteen spades it took on an aura of invincible threat. Danger. As though Mel were being patient and the patience might end at any instant. They searched for escape. There was a door. It led to other parts of the ship. It offered a way of escape—to what? An escape from the Presence to a hell of being unable to know what might come next.

Two or three edged towards that door anyway. Their eyes never left the inscrutible and half hidden Countenance. They were looking for a sign. For permission to escape.

THEY DIDN'T want to escape. They didn't know what they wanted. Forgiveness for doubting, an influx of sincere belief, death that would end the threat by placing it in the past as an accomplished fact for them. Anything except the vacuum of inaction that they had been plunged into by the death of Arnold and the laying of the twelve spades across the room.

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If only He would give some indication. Or was His ignoring of them a tacit acceptance of their desire to escape? Or was it a booby trap that would precipitate His displeasure, bringing sudden and mysterious death?

Minds snap under intense uncertainty. Two snapped at the same time, producing diametrically opposed lines of action. As though triggered by some secret signal, one man plunged toward the escape door and the other plunged toward the wall of death. No one else moved, or breathed.

The door of escape opened. Almost insane with fear that death would overtake him, the one who opened it turned for a last frantic look at Mel—and caved in his forehead against the blunt edge of the door.

The other plunged across the no-man's land, sheer momentum carrying him to Mel's feet as he fell. He lay there afraid to think, lest the very attempt meet with failure and thus prove to him he was dead. The whimper of fear that escaped his lips told him what he had feared to learn, and gave him courage.

"Forgive me, oh God," he moaned clumsily. "Forgive me. Forgive me." He tried to look up past the sensitive fingers that played with the card deck He tried to look at the Face. His courage failed him. He hung his head and waited. His heart began to beat with tangible blows. He felt himself tremble. Fear tore into his mind with jagged cuts. He groveled and whimpered.

And suddenly he was on his feet, running, stumbling, his heart pounding, his eyes unseeing. Fine blood vessels in his brain burst under the terrific pressure built up by his heart. Burst, and destroyed brain tissue. Commands that his brain had given to muscles carried him another step or two, then brought him up as though against a wall. He fell. His arms were stretched outward. They quivered. His legs trembled in violent spasms. He died.

One by one the others realized that under him was the king of spades.

CLIMAX had built upon climax. The sheer weight of it produced emotional collapse. Men accepted the inevitableness of their doom and awaited it with slumped shoulders and bent heads. Men accepted the omnipotence of their God and felt a thrill of comfort that they were among the favored.

"There is no forgiveness for the damned!" It was a whispered voice that sounded as thunder in the absolute silence. It was Herb's voice. His eyes were bright and feverish and gleeful. He had been the first, the very first, to proclaim his Belief. He was secure as man has instinctively yearned to be secure through the ages. He was bold with the consciousness that he was chosen of God.

As the echo of his hoarse whispering died he rose slowly to his feet. His glittering eyes flicked from one to another of those across the room. He took two slow, deliberate steps toward them and stopped, legs spread apart, head held high, holy purpose lighting his expression.

"There is the airlock," he said.

Les Bailer, beside him, looked up. "Yes," he said. "There's the airlock. That's what we've got to do. They can't remain on the same ship!"

"No!" It was the frenzied protest of one of the Condemned. It was taken up.

The wall of death symbolized by the cards and the two dead men was forgotten. Mel was forgotten. Here was something concrete. A line of specific action, of specific danger to some and a concrete way to please their God to others.

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Men rushed at men. Men tried to flee and were overwhelmed. The Condemned were hopelessly outnumbered.

The inner door of the airlock closed on a terrified scream. A light glowed. A hand pushed a lever and the light went out. And out in the void a bloated, still-warm corpse plopped in a soundless explosion, to drift apace with the ship until it was joined by another and another, and another, some of which did not explode but remained bloated monstrosities with bulging, staring dead eyes that slowly turned milky white as their surface moisture froze into a thin crust of salt-coated ice.

I filmed them as they floated there, then I developed the films to make sure they were all right. Already the floating bodies were drifting toward the stern of the ship. Soon the infinitesimal resistance of the meson cloud would push them behind, to be lost forever in this space a whole light-year away from the coldly white disk of Alpha Centauri.

Inside the ship, with the last of the Condemned gone through the airlock, Herb and Les and the others, panting from the exertion, looked toward Mel for some sign of approval. So sure were they that they had done the right thing that there was no shadow of doubt in their minds. No one of the Condemned remained aboard, dead or alive. It had been a clean sweep. It was over.

THEY LOOKED across the room at Mel, and they saw that his hands gripped the deck of cards so tensely that his knuckles were white. They looked at his shoulders and saw them trembling. They looked at his face and it was white and set, his nostrils quivering. They looked at his eyes and they were hidden behind lowered lids.

They looked at one another and saw mirrored what they were thinking inside. They had made a mistake. They could see it now. Hadn't Mel struck down those three without their help?

Herb's voice quavered, "Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord." The others, not daring to look at Mel again, kept their eyes on Herb.

His eyes held a faraway look. His tongue licked at his lips. His Adam's apple moved up and down in a loud swallow. Fanatic decision came slowly into his expression. Like an automaton he turned and went to the airlock.

"No!" someone whispered in protest.

The door opened. He stepped in. The door closed. The light went on. Shortly it went out.

Les Bailer, his features alight with purpose, followed.

One after another followed, until there remained only one alone with Mel. Harry Voigt.

He started toward the airlock, and hesitated. He tried to look at Mel and couldn't. He tried to picture remaining in the ship and couldn't. He tried to picture entering the airlock and couldn't. He looked at the thirteen spades now scattered over the deck. Thirteen cards signifying death.

He looked at the airlock door again. Outside was release. Welcome release. He stepped to the door. His fingers trembled a little as he opened it and bent to step inside.

"Wait!" The voice was an agonized whisper.

He froze with surprise, then turned slowly.

Across the room Mel was looking at him, his eyes agonized. The deck of cards was spilling slowly from his slack fingers.

"I—I don't want to be alone," Mel said.

A look of wonder on his face, Harry slowly stepped from the airlock and

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straightened up.

"You don't want—to be—alone?" he echoed wonderingly. Unbelieving, he saw fear and pleading follow each other across Mel's expression. What he saw fought with what he believed. "Then—" He dared to think the blasphemous Thought. He lived. He forced it to his lips "Then—you *aren't* God."

"No." It was a sullen admission. Mel began to tremble. "I—" He gulped in a deep breath. "I didn't mean . . . it was just a joke. I didn't know anyone would fall for it." He glanced briefly at Harry's paralyzed features and turned his eyes guiltily away. Irritation showed in his expression. "How was I to know? Then Arnold died. I began to believe it myself then. A minute ago I was sure. I was sure that all these years I've lived I hadn't suspected my true nature. I was sure I really was God. Until you started to leave me." He tried to look at Harry and couldn't.

"Then . . ." Harry gestured toward the airlock. "Those . . . why didn't you stop them?"

"I didn't know!" Mel shouted. "I tell you I really thought it was true. I didn't realize it wasn't until I saw that if you left me I would be all alone."

HARRY looked at his pleading eyes, his nervously working lips. Suddenly he laughed. It was a bitter, harsh sound. It startled him and he stopped. But the emotion that had created it remained. He laughed again. He laughed again and again, in short paroxysms that were uncontrolled. Mad.

"You're afraid to be alone," he gasped.

He ran to the airlock door.

Mel was on his feet, running after him. "No!" he was shouting. "Don't leave me. Don't leave me!"

Harry paused as Mel reached him and dropped at his feet. He looked down at him as Mel whimpered and shivered and pleaded, "Don't leave me. Don't leave me alone."

Contemptuously Harry shoved Mel back with his foot so that the door was clear.

Mel lifted his face. "Don't leave me alone," he said.

Harry looked into the pleading eyes and knew that Mel was quite mad.

"If you stay with me," Mel said, his expression brightening with a mixture of hope and cunning, "I'll give you all my money."

Deliberately Harry spat. He saw the sputum strike Mel's cheek. Then he turned and stepped into the airlock and closed the door.

Mel watched the light go on. He watched it until it went out.

I photographed Harry as he emerged from the airlock. His face was turned toward the camera lense so that I got his dying expression. It was one of the best shots I had taken. I knew that.

Meanwhile I also watched Mel inside the ship.

He absently wiped the sputum off his cheek with his sleeve. He rose on one hand and looked around the empty room, at the scattered cards, at a cigarette stub that was still miraculously smoldering, at the thousand and one evidences that a short time before there had been companions here. Living companions.

He laughed softly, absently, like he didn't know he was laughing and didn't hear himself.

Outside the ship the meson cloud was thinning. Behind the ship it lay, a billion miles long. Ahead there was only empty space between the ship and Alpha Centauri.

The instruments registered meson

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flow in spurts as the ship plunged through occasional streamers of it. The rockets were on once more, their deep rumble vibrating through the ship as it began to accelerate.

MEL GOT to his feet by successive stages and stood there, swaying weakly, still laughing his soft laugh of madness. After a while he started gathering his deck of cards together. When he had them all he counted them.

He counted them again. One was missing. He started looking around the room for it. It wasn't on the floor. He looked for it until he realized he was hungry.

He went to the food cabinet and pressed a combination of buttons without looking at them. He ate the food off the plate that came out, using his fingers and ignoring the gleaming silver, and without looking at what he ate.

When he was done he wiped his hands on his trousers. Then he started looking for the card again.

After a while he sat down and with a tired sigh started arranging the cards according to suits. He got them all arranged that way and counted each suit. There were only twelve spades.

He spread the spades out in a semicircle in front of him on the deck. The deuce, trey, and so on, up to the king.

The ace was missing.

He started to laugh his soft laugh again.

I recorded the laugh.

And I wanted to turn the ship away from its destination, Alpha Centauri.

But I couldn't. People limit our powers in many ways. They are afraid sometime we might take control of a ship instead of just guiding it to its destination. They're afraid we might do what I wanted to do now, turn the ship away from its destination and just go on and on through space forever, never turning back. They're even afraid to give us vocal organs because with speech we might influence them.

They don't trust us electronic mentalities yet.

They're afraid a meson cloud or something might disrupt our thought processes.

The ace of spades? It was in the airlock. Mel found it there a week later when he went out....

THE END

HARNESS FOR VOLCANOES

THERE'S NO longer any reason to fear an erupting volcano. According to recent studies made by the U.S. Geological Survey, it is possible to properly place walls so that lava pouring from a volcano can be turned from its path without endangering life.

In 1951, when a lava flow was issuing from Mount Mihara on Oshima Island in Tokyo, a concrete building which partially blocked the path of the molten material was able to redirect its flow.

Every active volcano is a potential danger. Yet, results like the above show that if walls were built so that the lava would be diverted into a safe channel, one of our most fearsome natural dangers would be avoided. —*Leo Lewin*

PRODIGAL WEATHERMAN

Recent studies of thunderstorms, made in an effort to eliminate some of the hazards facing airplane pilots who must fly through storm areas, show that most of the moisture and energy dissipates without falling as rain or appearing as lightning flashes. Perhaps a third of the potential moisture that passes through the thunderstorm never condenses enough to form raindrops. Another third turns to rain, but this also evaporates later as it moves in the downdraft that lies in the main part of the thunderstorm. And then only one third of the final third actually falls as rain, since a part evaporates from the sides of the individual thunderstorm cell, and part stays as vapor in the cloud which is left behind by the storm. —*L. Stow*

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At the point of victory, defeat rose out of the swamp

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DOOM JUNGLE

By John W. Jakes

What do you do if hope is dead? If death is sure and if the odds are ten million to one? Why, you keep right on fighting, of course!

WARD CARSON strode across the fenced-in compound. The mud sucked at his boots, brownish-black and foul-smelling. His clothes were spattered with it, and tiny globs stuck in his matted beard. He moved with purpose and determination, even though he eyed the gray-skinned Venusian guards who stood beyond the fence on the edge of the jungle. They kept watchful eyes on the Terran prisoners in the compound, about thirty of them in all. The Venusians kept their riot guns pointing always inward. Carson felt that there must be at least a dozen of them centered on him.

Dr. Anslow and his daughter Margaret looked up as he approached. They squatted on their heels in the

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mud, talking softly. Ward knelt down, looking carefully about, and said something inane, laughing in a loud voice. The Venusians paid no attention.

"Did they finish it?" Anslow asked tensely. His eyes showed the ravages of hunger and imprisonment and, like Carson's, his beard was heavy.

"They finished it all right," Carson replied in a whisper. "Last night. It's hidden in some old rags by the wall of the ammunition building." He indicated the hastily erected board structure adjoining the compound fence on the other side.

Margaret looked at him worriedly. Things had changed so much for them, Carson thought bitterly. A few months ago he and Anslow had been teaching biochemistry at the University of Venusberg. And then came the uprising, with Earthmen slaughtered or locked up in the compounds in the heart of the steaming jungles. The Venusians were taking their home world back, reclaiming it from the invaders. Carson could not argue the goodness or badness of the revolt. He only knew that his job was to help this band of Earthmen escape, if possible. And Margaret...there had been plans for marriage....well....

He squinted at the eternal foggy sky. "In an hour," he said, "we'll be ready."

Anslow shook his head doubtfully. "I wonder if we can do it, Ward."

"We've got to," Carson said in a harsh whisper. "Or we'll rot here, waiting for them to shove us into the fire ovens."

Margaret shuddered. "Ward, don't talk like that...."

"We've got to face facts. They hate us."

ANSLOW attempted to speak in a businesslike manner. It quieted his daughter for the moment. "Tell me now. Exactly what is the plan?"

"Well," Carson said, "all we've got is the bottle stuffed with rags, and some lighter fluid one of the men had. We're going to set fire to the ammunition building and then use your little flask of nitro to blast our way in and get weapons. It's a lucky thing the Venusians don't worry about searching prisoners except for heavy weapons."

"That's because there's no place to go," Margaret said softly. "Nothing but the jungle. It's alive and crawling....they know it, we don't—it'll kill us, Ward—it—" She turned away suddenly, stifling a sob.

"How far is it to the old rocket field?" Anslow asked.

"About three miles," Carson said. "There are two or three old ships there. They'll need some work, but one of them ought to get us off Venus. That is, if the Venusians haven't destroyed them in the last week."

Anslow started to ask another question and glanced up. A Venusian guard, clad in the uniform of the People's Reclaiming Movement, stopped outside the fence near them and shoved the muzzle of his weapon at them.

"You, Earth!" he snarled. "Break it up!"

"We were just talking—" Anslow began.

The guard smiled mercilessly and triggered a blast from the riot gun over their heads. It splattered and exploded noisily in the mud a few feet behind them. Carson got to his feet.

"Better do as he says," he told them, moving away toward the other side of the compound.

He made his way toward Farley, a thin-faced young physicist who crouched alone, smoking one of his few remaining cigarettes. Farley peered up at him out of red-rimmed eyes.

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"Ward, I'm getting frightened.

"We're going, Tom."

"I—I don't think we should," Farley argued. "Three miles through that jungle... we may never come out alive. I'm for taking our chances with the Venusians."

"And die here?" Carson grated. "Oh no. I—"

He stopped. Three of the guards were walking in his direction.

"Quick!" he whispered to Farley. "Where's the bottle?"

Farley indicated a pile of rags lying against the wall of the ammunition building.

"Give me the lighter," Carson snapped. Farley handed him the silver object without protest.

"Listen," Carson told him rapidly, "we've been doing too much talking. They're going to get suspicious. I think we'd better go right now." Suspicion was not the only factor worrying him. He wondered about the capacity of the men who were like Farley. Were they strong enough to risk the dangers of escape through the treacherous jungle? If they waited too long, their chances would die with the growing fear.

"Go get the fight started," Carson whispered. "And pass the word."

FARLEY hesitated for a moment and then loped away across the compound. The guards diverted their attention to him, watching him join another group of men, talk for a moment and then back off as the group suddenly broke up into a melee of fists and curses.

Carson sidled to the wall, dropped down and broke open the lighter fuel compartment. He uncovered the bottle, drained the contents of the lighter over the rags, and hefted the bottle. Walking rapidly a few feet from the wall of the building, he flicked the lighter, touched the fire to the rags and flung the blazing mass at the wooden wall. It smashed loudly, splattering fiery liquid across the boards.

The guards began to shout hoarsely. Riot gun charges flared through the compound, making criss-cross patterns around him, sizzling through the air to explode in the jungle.

"Anslow!" he shouted, *"the nitro!"*

A hundred yards away, Anslow tore his shirt open and seized the tiny flask of nitro taped to his chest. Carson dodged as he flung it at the fiery wall of the building. A thunderous explosion shattered the air and the scream of the guards trapped within the building filled the humid air.

A riot gun charge caught Anslow in the chest, shearing his body in two. Margaret screamed. Carson shouted hoarse orders to the rest of the men who crouched low and sprinted for the opening in the building. Margaret stayed behind, kneeling by her father's body. Carson raced toward her, seeing another guard's weapon aimed at her. He threw her out of the way as the charge burned by above them.

Margaret kept on screaming as Carson dragged her toward the building. He pulled her inside, avoiding the sputtering flame-edged sections of the wall. The men were breaking the door of a second room. It shattered under their blows and they quickly formed into a line, passing riot guns and jungle knives, immense sharp-bladed cutting tools, from hand to hand.

Carson seized a riot pistol, thrust it into his belt. "Hurry it up!" he shouted. "They'll have runners out to the nearest guard post. We've got to get started."

Margaret struggled in his grip. "Let me go, Ward," she screamed, her

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voice edged with hysteria. "Let me go, he's out there, he's out there—"

A riot charge blasted through the wall of the building, catching two of the men. They fell, bodies smoking away to charred embers. Carson raised his pistol, sighting quickly through the hole in the wall. Three blasts tore the Venusian to pieces.

Margaret wrenched away and headed toward the compound. He seized her again, slapping her hard across the face. She stopped running and stared at him, her eyes empty—sobbing. He thrust a pistol into her hands.

"Take this and keep quiet!" Every word twisted a knife of anguish in him, but he had to think now of the good of all of them.

"Everybody ready?" he called. Rough assent came from the men.

THEY STARTED cautiously out of the building, Carson in the lead. Farley followed close behind, more out of fear than bravery, Carson thought. And Margaret stumbled along, the pistol dangling from her hand. They reached the edge of the jungle in a few moments.

Carson turned. "All right now. Keep together. We've got three miles to go. It's going to be hard—so—"

Another blast thundered through the air. One of the men jerked up his rifle and pulled the firing bar. The Venusian toppled slowly from a lower branch of one of the trees. Carson smiled grimly.

Without another word, he headed into the jungle.

The world they entered was one of nightmare and horror. It seemed to Carson that some warning must have gone out invisibly to the trees and the plants and the animals. Leeches sucked the blood from their skin. Creepers trailed sticky ichor over their bodies. Tiny rodents bit at them.

The jungle smelled stale, fetid, rotten. Here and there lush brilliantly-colored flowers bloomed. Carson avoided them, knowing the terrible vapors they gave off at close range.

By the time they had plodded only about half a mile, all of them were worn out and fearful. The heat blanketed them oppressively and Carson wondered if all of them would be able to make it.

And then they reached the swamps.

They plowed into the waist-high water. Carson forged ahead, testing the bottom for good footing. Suddenly he heard Margaret's high-pitched scream and whirled.

She stood a few feet behind him, hands clutching her face, staring in terror at a white-mouthed snake that reared up out of the water before her, swaying. Its fangs shone with foul black liquid.

"Margaret!" Carson shouted. *"Stand still!"*

She screamed again, as loudly as she could, shaking her body, forcing the scream out in all its fury, letting it convulse her. The men watched her tensely, afraid to move.

Farley turned on Carson. "Kill it, you fool! Kill it!" His voice, too, showed that the breaking point was not far away.

Carson drew his pistol carefully and aimed at the snake's head. The thing swayed back and forth, faster and faster, rearing higher out of the water. Carson saw the muscles rippling under its hide.

Just as the snake darted forward, Carson fired. The reptile's body broke apart in mid-air and fell quivering into the water. It vanished from the surface in an instant, leaving only faint ripples.

They started on once more. Carson worried now about the distance they had to cover. Farley was weakening

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slowly, and that would have a demoralizing effect on the others. Carson could hear them mumbling fearfully behind him. And Margaret had almost exhausted her emotional strength.

IT HAD BEEN so long since any words of love had passed between them that Carson felt discouraged. If they finally did escape, Margaret might be a changed person. The jungles of Venus had driven stronger humans, explorers and traders with iron nerves, insane.

Carson plodded ahead silently through the water. He estimated the distance they had come as about two miles. One more to the deserted rocket field. His legs ached and the water, though warm, chilled him to the bone.

They lost three more men in the next half hour.

The first, a physiologist named Sommers, had been developing a case of fever for some time during their stay in the compound. Suddenly he broke away from the procession and reeled toward a bright-colored mass of foliage. Carson shouted a warning, but it was too late.

Sommers, with his fever-eyes rolling insanely, was folded into the pink maw of a six-foot-high carnivore plant and Carson turned away, sickened, as the plant closed, driving its spines into the man's body. When the plant closed entirely, blood bubbled faintly out of the lips of the pod.

Carson had to drive them. He got behind them, among them, to the side, pushing them on bodily, cursing them. He wondered how long he himself could hold out.

Then a small Oriental, formerly an endocrinologist at the University, stumbled and fell in the water. He vanished in an instant, pulled down and covered by the quicksand beneath the surface.

Soon after that they ran into a school of cannibal fish. Carson fired blasts into the water and the men stumbled forward as Carson pulled Margaret along. His muscles ached more and more now. One of the group fell behind and the fish swarmed over him, their colorful bodies whipping back and forth over the water. Blood spread out in a thin film around them.

They managed to make it to the edge of the jungle with no further casualties. A hoarse ragged cheer went up and they rushed forward, sinking down on the broken slabs of jet-burned concrete, breathing harshly, relaxing.

Margaret slumped against Carson. He eased himself down to a sitting position. She was nearly unconscious, cradling her head on his shoulder. Farley crawled toward him, his mouth hanging open slackly.

"Listen, Carson—" he panted. He stopped to gulp more air, blinking his eyes at the fog-shrouded sky. "Listen, Carson, we can't keep this up—we just can't— God— I'm so tired— sick—"

Carson pointed a finger at the barn-like buildings on the other side of the feild. Rusty snouts of three old rockets poked forth, their plates clogged with vines and mold. "See those ships? We can get out of here in them."

"I don't want to go any place," Farley whined. "I'm tired. I want to stop right here. I wish—"

Carson jerked his head upward, searching the sky. The thunder of a small rocket echoed across the jungle.

"On your feet!" he shouted. "Ship! Get to the hangars!"

NO ONE moved. They stared at him him dumbly.

Forcing his body to move, Carson pulled men to their feet, sent them

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stumbling across the concrete toward the hangars. Farley fought against him. They struggled back and forth just as the Venusian rocket flew over the edge of the jungle from the east.

Farley broke away and ran across the field, waving his arms wildly. "Here I am!" he shouted at the ship. "Come on, I'll give myself up, I won't fight any more, I just want to rest—"

The ship swept low over the field and a forward port slid open. Carson fell on his face as the blast burned a path across the concrete, turning it to bubbling molten rock. A little wisp of smoke rose from the spot where Farley had stood.

A desperate plan formed rapidly in Carson's mind. The rest of them, including Margaret, were crouched now within the first rocket shed, relatively safe. The flier circled the field again and headed back toward Carson.

He started to run, changing the riot pistol adjustment to concentrated fire as he raced along. The jets coughed close behind him and he heard the sizzle of the bolt being loosed.

He jerked himself backwards, feeling the heat from the blast, flashed down, melting the concrete five feet in front of him. His face felt raw and singed. His arms hung leadenly. The flier shot on.

Just as it passed overhead, Carson began firing at the three stern tubes.

He pulled the trigger and held it. A long chain of charges ripped into the tubes. After nearly a dozen loads had been spent, the charge chamber registered empty. The flier wobbled crazily against the sky. The jets bubbled and fused together and Carson ran in the opposite direction, waiting for the moment when the propulsive forces backed up against the blocked outlet.

The ship splintered with a roar and vanished in a cloud of fine particles. Carson raced on, throwing himself with a last burst of energy into the foliage at the jungle's edge. The radioactive bits of matter rained down on the concrete and set it to glowing.

The breath came slowly back into Carson's lungs.

He and the rest of them sat for nearly half an hour, resting and regathering their shattered strength and nerves. Margaret leaned against Carson once more, not saying a word. Finally they went to work on one of the old ships, testing the drive apparatus and cleaning the tubes.

Six hours after that, the ship with all aboard lifted from the field straight up through the clouded atmosphere.

The hellish dank jungle fell away below them. Carson left a Terran engineer named Gerlinsky at the controls, with the course charted straight for Earth.

Carson went to a cabin in the stern of the ship where Margaret lay sleeping. He sat in the dimly lighted room, smoking and watching her for a long time. Her breathing was regular now, her face more relaxed.

Once she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"I'm right here, darling," he whispered. "I'm right here if you need me."

She smiled again, wearily, and touched his hand. The experience had been almost too much, Carson saw. But she had not changed. Above all, she had not changed about him.

Her eyes closed.

Carson put the cigarette to his lips, listening to the sound of the old engines, roaring now, carrying them safely home to Earth.

THE END

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THEY ALL LOVE SCIENCE FICTION!

By

Merritt Linn

SCIENCE-FICTION in magazines, books and films has advanced unbelievably fast in the last decade in this country. This tends to make us forget that this imaginative field has captured other portions of the world equally strongly. Before the Nazis came to power in Germany, s-f was flourishing there in all three media. But the contender for honors today with America is Great Britain, which has a vigorous and interesting amount of activity in this esoteric field. We in America are becoming more and more conscious of it.

Science-fiction in magazines and books takes its cue in Britain from America. They are strongly imitative of our activity and their stories paraphrase ours, though here and there an exceptionally good short story or novel appears. Recently a fine, realistic, first-Moon-flight rocket story appeared which needed no apologies at all. S-f in Britain shows every sign of standing on its own feet though the audience still favors American publications—including *Amazing* and *Fantastic*!

In films, however, with the exception of *Destination Moon*, we have nothing on them, for in terms of science fiction and fantasy, the British are delivering the goods. By far the best fantasy films have been British; they seem to have a feel for this subtle medium, and they put it across so much more convincingly than Hollywood does. The latest British extravaganza reported on is the opera-fantasy (more of the latter than the former!) "The Tales Of Hoffman". This captivating old story is ideally suited for film treatment, where robots (Olympia, the mechanical doll) are used with beautiful effect. It is a must for fantasy lovers.

Fortunately, the British lead in fantasy film making will soon be cut down by the release of the newer, more effective American films which are already in the cans and scheduled for release soon. But we can't underestimate or ignore the profound effect the British have had on the fantasy film—it's almost as bad for our prestige and morale as their superb jet engines which we're now using!

KIDDIE-KAR ATOM BLASTS

By E. Bruce Yaches

NOW EVERYBODY can get into the act! The Atomic Energy Commission has at long last released a considerable body of information on the actual construction of a small nuclear reactor with which one can make use of atomic energy from fissioning Uranium—235. How you get the U-235 is another matter, but at least you have governmental permission to try!

Ignoring the facetious aspects of what is after all a serious matter, the Atomic Energy Commission has realized that you can't conceal knowledge. The result is that they've given out this information in order to permit almost any university to set up an actual nuclear reactor with which basic work in atomic physics may be done, as well as to provide for the training of future atomic physicists.

Fundamentally, the atomic reactor called "Hypo" (for high power) is nothing but a metal tank housing a pound or two of Uranium-235 which is in a fissionable state. Piercing the tank are metal tubes through which cooling water is run and in which items for irradiation may be placed. The water solution containing the uranium nitrate and the U-235 is the basic reactor. And the beautiful part about it is that you don't have to worry about its blowing up in your face and taking half the city with it. It is self-controlling, operating on the principle that if the reaction speeds up too much, the solution becomes less dense and consequently the reaction slows down and cools off. In a nutshell, you have all the essentials for an energy-generating atomic power plant.

Details on shielding and other matters of course must be understood, for there is no question about it—this gadget is *not* a toy! It is a scientific tool intended for the laboratories of schools. It is a marvellous thing to realize that finally comparatively private individuals have access to atomic power in even so rudimentary a form, as well as to consider that nothing dangerous can come from this instrument which is rather designed for education and research than for military application. Let the big plants take care of that!

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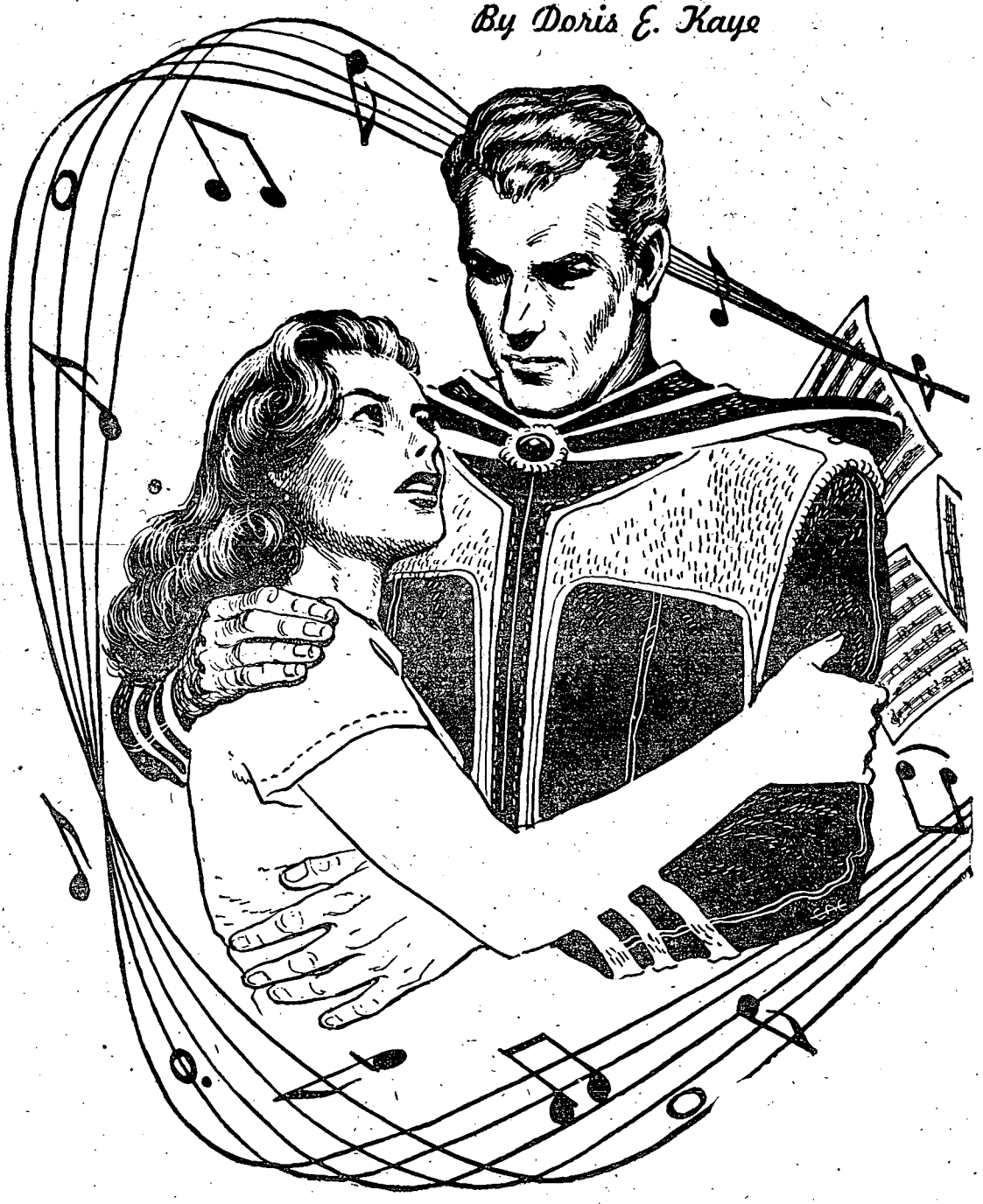
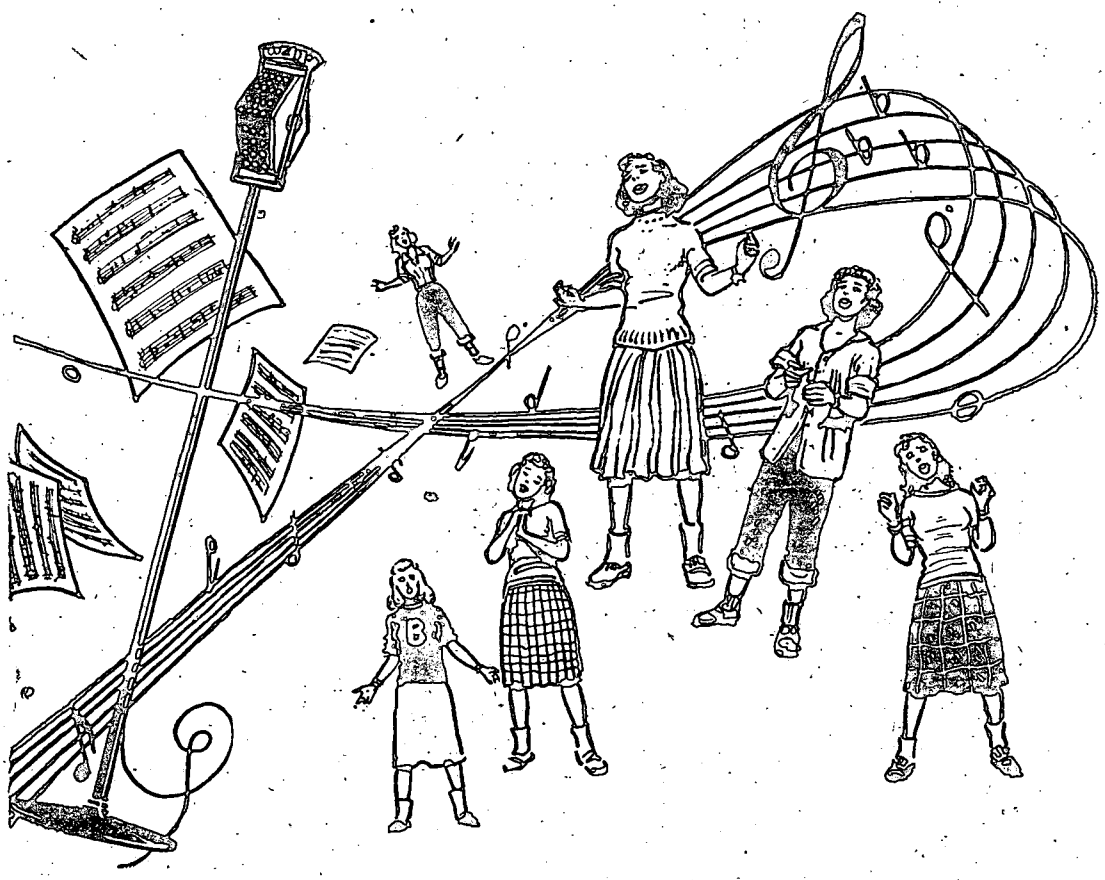
I'LL MEET YOU YESTERDAY

By Doris E. Kaye



Love, it is said, spans the ages. But that's not the half of it. Love also spans time and space—and the greed of an ugly little man who measures everything in dollars and cents



SHE CAME into the office a little late that morning. The sun was already working its way through the interstices of the El structure outside the grimy window, and the dust along the glass top of her desk seemed thicker than usual.

There were several letters and circulars already on the floor under the mail drop. She scooped them up, dropped them in the desk tray marked INCOMING, and pulled off her pert red hat. She fluffed out her short blonde hair, then went to the desk, got out a dust cloth and ran it vigorously, almost viciously, across the glass top and the seat of her swivel chair.

The corridor door opened suddenly and a cigar came in followed by a

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short, thick-bodied man in rumpled seersucker. He pushed the door shut with his heel, looked dully at the girl with the dustcloth and grunted. "Mornin', Molly. What's the mail?"

She looked at him without pleasure, smelling the rankness of his cheap cigar. It was much too early in the day for that kind of stench and she had never gotten used to it during the eight months that she had been Sam Clark's secretary.

"I haven't gotten to the mail yet, Mr. Clark," Molly said flatly.

He grunted again, took off his stained, last-year's panama, rubbed his large circular bald spot absently and disappeared into the inner office, leaving its door open.

The phone on Molly's desk rang while she was putting away the dust cloth. She slammed the drawer shut harder than necessary and yanked off the receiver.

"Clark Music Publishers," she said mechanically.

The voice that came back to her was masculine, young and a little unsteady with what could have been eagerness. "My name is Akbar Dos. You have my mem?"

Molly took the receiver away from her ear, stared at it blankly, then put it back. "Something wrong with the connection, Mr.—uh—your what?"

"My mem. I put it in— Oh, of course. I mean letter. Do you have my letter? The man at the United States Post Office told me it would be delivered at your establishment early this morning."

A wrinkle bisected the straight natural line of Molly's brow. "I'm terribly sorry, sir. What did you say your name was?"

"Akbar Dos. Apparently I have masked my simple request in the vapor of words. I merely wished to learn whether you had received my—"

"You mean you sent us a song?"

A LOW-PITCHED, rather pleasant chuckle came over the wire. It made him sound, for the first time, almost human. "Almost human!" Molly thought, startled. She leaned back into her chair, eased the top drawer open with a finger of her free hand, and reached for a cigarette.

"Yes, I would say that is precisely accurate. A lyric, or—as you just spoke—a song. I believe that was what you solicited in your advertisement?" The rising inflection of his voice invited confidence.

"That's quite right, Mr. Dos," Mollie said. "But if your manuscript is here, I'm afraid I can't tell you anything about it yet."

"Oh, certainly! It is still early in your worl—" The word clipped off. "—in your field of endeavor."

Mollie gave up the absent-minded groping for a cigarette. "Yes, it is early, but if you'll give me your number, I'll call you, Mr. Dos, just as soon as I come to your letter."

An almost panicky note entered into the voice on the other end of the line. "I'm afraid that won't be possible. But I shall employ this instrument again, in half a revolu—in half an hour. Thank you, Miss. Good-bye."

The receiver was still tight against Mollie's ear when Clark's voice brought her dazed mind back to reality.

"Hey, kid, what in—what was *that?* You look like you seen a ghost or somethin'." Clark had come out of his office and was looking at her strangely.

Mollie jabbed at the mail with the bent steel letter-opener just a little too vigorously.

"Nothing, Mr. Clark. That is—nothing important. It was just someone who answered our ad."

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Clark's voice rose an octave. "Nothing *important?* Hey, sister, you're feelin' okay, ain't ya? *Any* character that answers my ad is damn important! He send any dough?"

Mollie began to slice away at the stack of envelopes. "I'll let you know, Mr. Clark. His letter is probably in here somewhere."

"Okay, but remember, will ya? All the stuff that gets here is *good*—as long as the check doesn't start bouncing while it's still in the envelope!"

"I'll remember, Mr. Clark."

HE WENT back to his desk in the inner office, and Mollie set about arranging the mail in two neat stacks—envelopes and checks on one side—manuscripts on the other. But this time she didn't go through each one methodically. Instead she flipped hurriedly through the entire output to reach that voice on the phone, still echoing through her thoughts. It wasn't difficult to find. Instead of ordinary music-manuscript paper, or plain lined sheets torn out of children's exercise books and blocked off into five-line bars, her search ended with a sheet of parchment. The Ten Commandments couldn't have been given a better send-off. It was rich and heavy, smooth as a hand-cream ad, with a fine deckel edge. The ink might have been siphoned off a Parish painting. It seemed to rise off the paper in almost third-dimensional intensity. The sheer beauty of the thing held Mollie's eyes. Then, as though out of a vast silenced auditorium where only one musician remained to carry on the reprise of an unwritten symphony, the melody came to her. Softly, scarcely aware of her own voice, she began to sing the notes written on that sheet of parchment. It was the music of the seraphim and cherubim. A melody that could take its staccato notes from the tinkling of stars—its legato from the drifting movement of powder-puff clouds in a windless summer sky.

"Hey, what's that tune?" Clark's voice boomed out again, this time across the top of the wooden partition separating his office from hers. The sound had as much melody to it as the screech of a subway train around a tight track and shook Mollie bruskly out of her reverie.

"Oh." She slipped quickly into the best show of indifference she could muster. "It's only one of the tunes in the mail. I'm sorry I disturbed you—didn't think I was singing that loud."

"*Disturb* me? You're kiddin', ain't ya?" Clark was up on his feet and over at her desk. "Where is it, Mollie? Lemme see it. Who's the sucker?"

Reluctantly, Mollie handed him the parchment.

Clark's paw shot out to grab the paper.

"Hey! What the hell's *this?*"

He let her slide the manuscript into his palm. He raised it slowly, almost tenderly, into range of his squinting, incredulous eyes.

MOLLIE said nothing. Maybe the nature of the parchment itself would scare him off. He never liked anything he couldn't understand. He was afraid of it. And there was so very little he *could* understand.

Clark broke the silence. "This the thing you were hummin', Mollie?" His voice was almost civil.

"Yes, sir." The note of defeat in her voice seemed to linger in the air.

"On this hunka—hunka—?"

Mollie said, "—parchment, Mr. Clark."

"Okay—parchment. Damnedest way to write a tune I ever heard of!" He turned sharply back to her. "Ya *sure,* kid, this is the one?"

"Would you like to hum it yourself,

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Mr. Clark?" Mona Lisa's smile had probably been born under similar circumstances. Mollie knew he couldn't read a note. It wasn't necessary in his kind of music publishing. All you had to know was how to word a phony ad, and then wait for all the undiscovered Schuberts, Gershwins, Berlins and Porters, hiding their talent under a bushel of tall corn, to bite.

It was simple after that. For Sam Clark's Publishing Company was strictly for the yokels. Twenty-five bucks got your song read. *Read* was the word for it too. There wasn't even a kazoo in the office, let alone a piano. Fifty bucks got it published. Exactly ten copies—run off on a ditto machine.

Yes, it was strictly for the little fish in the big pond west of Newark and east of Pomona, and Clark followed the rules of the game to the letter "S". S for Sucker.

Mollie, straight out of business school, still with the fuzz of blackboard chalk in her hair, dewy-wet behind the eyelids and equipped with five years of piano lessons and a high-school course in music-appreciation, had taken the job for its "glamour".

"Come on, Mollie," Clark said. "Let's get hold of a piano—or a fiddle—or whatever you play. What d'ya tell me it was?" He was now pulling persistently at her arm.

MOLLIE eased him away, handling the business of getting out of her chair by herself. "I play the piano, Mr. Clark. I think I told you that when you hired me. Somehow I seemed to think that would help me get the job."

"Sure—sure—it did," Clark answered impatiently. "That's what I want now. Who's that character at the other end of the hall who comes in to talk to you? He's got a piano, hasn't he?"

Molly nodded.

"Then let's go!" He was at the door by this time, waiting for her. She reached the hall, following him, when he spun around suddenly and grabbed her shoulders.

"Say, that guy's not a publisher, is he?" His watery grey eyes froze to an icy brilliance. Plagiarism, even under the more familiar names he had for it, was an ever-present occupational hazard in this world. So easy to get away with too. He should know!

"No," Mollie said quietly. "He has a recording place. I'm sure he'll let us use one of the studios." Then, as his face melted back into its usual formless batter, she added, "Nobody will hear it but you and me."

Satisfied, Clark reached for her arm and urged her quickly down the hall and followed her into the neighboring office.

"Hello, Mike," she called into the cutting room.

"Hi, Mollie," a voice came back. "Be with you in a minute. Air-check. Just two more minutes to go."

"No hurry. We'll wait." Mollie eased herself into a heavy red-leather chair. Clark was busy sizing up the room—probably for concealed microphones. His right foot beat sixteen-to-the-bar on the black and white mottled inlaid linoleum.

"Sure this is okay?" he whispered hoarsely to Mollie.

She was smiling patiently in answer, when Mike strolled into the room. The broad grin that seemed to take in both his thin cheeks weakened slightly as he found Clark with her.

"Mike, this is Mr. Clark, my boss. I don't believe you've met. Mr. Clark—Mike Glenn."

Clark ignored Glenn's outstretched hand. There was a pause. Then Mollie said: "Mr. Clark would like to hear one of our tunes. Can we borrow your piano studio for a few minutes?"

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"Sure thing, Mollie. Just go right in. We don't have a date booked in there until 11:30. That'll give you about ten-twelve minutes."

"Thanks, Mike, that's plenty."

Mollie headed for a short, narrow hallway to the right of the outer office, with Clark close at her heels.

"Hey, Mollie," Glenn called after them. "Want it cut?"

Clark's voice exploded into one word. "No!"

THE SOUND got him stared at by both Mollie and the young man. Clark, obviously embarrassed at the sudden nakedness of his distrust, began to stumble back toward civility of a sort. "Uh—uh—no, thanks, young fella. That is—not right now. Thanks anyway, though. Mollie'll just run it down for me."

They disappeared beyond the sound-proof doors of the studio room. Inside, Clark bounced over to the piano and slammed the music on the rack.

"Here, kid—play it."

Mollie straightened her skirt and slid onto the bench. She raised her hands to the keyboard and studied the paper for a moment—a moment too long for Clark.

"Whatsa matter? You sang it, didn't you? Come on, kid, let's hear it. We gotta get outa this joint in ten minutes, like the guy said."

Mollie couldn't stall any longer. Slowly, carefully, she began to interpret the tiny markings on the parchment. Once again, the same strange enchantment of the notes wove their spell. Her fingers didn't *play* the tune. They were *propelled* by it!

Now she was sure. There had been something different about that voice on the phone. There *was* something different about this tune!

"Terrific, Mollie!" Clark said. "Damnedest thing I ever heard! We'll hit two million in sheet sales alone!" He might have been running a potato race now, between one end of the piano and the other. Instead of potatoes, however, he was picking up gilt-edge ideas. "First thing we gotta do is get a record on it. Ya know—name band stuff. Then we'll tie up with one of those hot-shot disk jockies. Maybe a little pay-off to get the first few plugs—doesn't matter, just a few bucks'll do it—and bru-ther! We'll make the hit parade in no time flat! Hey—?" He stopped the pacing abruptly and spun his little round head at Mollie. "You listening to me, kid? Don'tcha get it? We're in, kid—we're *in!* That damn tune is outta this world!"

Mollie's fingers dropped flat across the keyboard. "That's it!" She breathed the words instead of speaking them. "Out of this world!" She shook her head a little in an effort to come back to reality. "But Mr. Clark, we don't own this music!"

"Don't *own* it?" Clark's short thick neck contracted into his suit collar like a turtle that had run into something. "What are *you* here for? You spoke to the guy. Go get him! I'll have the contract all ready!" He licked at the word *all* as though it tasted good.

Mollie pushed the piano bench back. "Yes, sir. I'll have him come into the office when he calls, tomorrow."

"And don't you worry, baby." We'll own that tune! By God, we'll *own* it!"

IT WAS almost closing time the following day before the phone rang. Even as the bell sounded, Mollie knew this must be it.

"Clark Music Publishers, good afternoon," she said expectantly.

It was the same voice—and there was a relieved note in it. "I hoped you would answer. I regret my delay in reestablishing this contact. The

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waves were broken—I mean the line was out. Anything to report?"

"I'd say this is Mr. Akbar Dos talking?" Mollie smiled into the phone, genuinely amused by his weird yet disarmingly pleasant way of speaking.

"Why, yes, Miss—Miss—?" The question dangled on the line.

"Conners. Mollie Conners. I'm sorry you didn't leave your phone number, Mr. Dos. You see, Mr. Clark is quite interested in your song. In fact, he'd like to publish it. Do you suppose you could get in to see him this afternoon?"

"This afternoon? Why, I don't know. My equipment is not functioning properly and the time continuum is affected at the moment. But I would like to—" His voice trailed into worried thought.

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Dos. You don't need your car to get here. The subway's right at the corner. If you tell me where you are now I'll give you all the directions you need."

A soft chuckle came through to her. It made the promise of their meeting even more exciting. Mollie was used to passes in this business, but if this were one, it was certainly the smoothest she'd ever encountered.

"No, my dear, I'm afraid the Underground wouldn't help me much, but I'll make it, anyway. Will *you* wait there for me?"

"Why yes, Mr. Dos."

"Good! I'll get through shortly. Good day—M o l l i e." The name dropped in quietly, almost expectantly, before the connection clicked off. There was no time to answer, in kind. Yet Mollie suddenly realized that that was exactly what she was ready to do. "Akbar"—how could anyone get to know anyone else, with a name like that! But this was silly! Daydreaming about a voice that had no more substance to it than a melody line!

"Hey, Mollie!" Clark's voice leapfrogged over the wooden partition. "Did that character call yet?"

"Just a couple of minutes ago." Mollie answered.

"Why didn'tcha tell me? What'd he say? Is he comin' in?" The questions, and Clark himself, kept coming at her until he was crouched over her desk, leaning on his porky palms. The tiny patches of stiff black hair between his sweaty knuckles, sprouting like weeds, riveted her gaze.

"Get on the beam, kid! When's the guy comin' in?"

"Should be here any minute, Mr. Clark."

"Any minute? Where's he comin' from? Didja find out where he lives?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I never thought of asking. The connection sounded like it might be a long-distance call, and he had no return address on his letter. But he can't be far away."

MOLLIE turned back to her typewriter. She always used the gesture as her exit line. Most of the time Clark got it. But this wasn't one of them.

"Aren't you through yet, kid? You should be going home by now."

Mollie slid a letter-head into the typewriter, adjusting the margins while she spoke. "In a little while. I just want to finish up a few things."

"Can'tcha do 'em tomorrow?" His simulated ease was as phony as a scrub-woman's perfume.

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Clark. I don't mind staying a while tonight."

Clark shrugged his tired shoulders. "Beats me. When ya wanna be nice to a girl, she makes like you're a slave-driver. Okay then, if you wanna stay, then stay." He started back to his office. "But ya don't have to, you know.

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I got the contracts all ready and I'll take care of the guy."

"Oh, it's not that." she said quickly. "I know you don't need me here. I'll just finish up this work and leave." Her typewriter began its staccato chatter.

Mollie was three lines down on her letter when she knew she wasn't alone in the room. Her fingers stopped in their arched position on the keys, but she found she couldn't move to look around. No door had opened—she was sure of that. She'd been listening for it. And besides, you couldn't miss those hinges. Like a rusty nail tearing through canvas. Or the rattle of the pebbled glass in its warped frame. There was none of that, now. But somebody was there! Cautiously, Mollie turned only her head, following the crowded silence with narrowed eyes.

There he stood—all six feet of him, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth and finding its echo in the twinkling lights of his wide-set, blue-black eyes. His hair was smooth, straight and dark against the high arch of his pale forehead. There was almost a mask-like quality to his long lean face, from the wide, pronounced cheek-bones to the full strong chin. Not even the shadow of a beard marred its surface, giving his skin an ivory transparency. A boyish face, but the face of a boy who had conquered youth and held it captive. He wore his oxford-grey suit easily, comfortably—yet it looked too new for him ever to have bent a knee under the sharp crease of the trousers. His left hand rested loosely in the pocket of his coat, while his right covered the gleaming metal buckle at his waist—held there by his thumb, which was tucked inside it. Through his fingers Mollie could see two of the tiny dials that seemed to run across the chrome finish.

Their eyes, intent on each other—Mollie's in wide wonder, his in pleasant recognition—completed all the introduction that was necessary.

MINUTES before, while her fingers automatically typed a form letter, Mollie had rehearsed to herself her most cordial welcome. But now, when she found her voice, it belonged to a different claim check. "How in heaven's name did you get in here? I *always* hear that door open!"

"I guess you were pretty busy, Mollie. You *are* Mollie, aren't you?" Even the slight note of anxiety didn't alter the tone of his deep voice.

Just as she nodded her head, her lips relaxing in a faint smile, Clark bounced into the outer office, rattling the wooden partition with his thick shoulders. His short hairy arm, now coatless, shot out in greeting.

"So there you are, Mr. Dos! Hiya, fella!" A wide professional smile pasted his thick red lips flat against his teeth. "Glad to meet ya!"

As Dos released his hold on his belt-buckle to return the handshake, Mollie stared at the strange contraption. Two more of those tiny dials showed now.

"Mr. Clark?" Dos returned lightly.

The little man chuckled self-consciously. Rooster-fashion, his round head jerked up sharply. "In the flesh, boy! Clark's the old Hancock!"

"The what?"

Clark ignored the question. "Stranger 'round these parts, huh, Mr. Dos? Well, we get lots of 'em in this business. Best tunes come outta the hills, sometimes. You know, folk stuff. Catches on like mad. Good clean American stuff—that's what they're cryin' for these days." His words were bouncing like pin-balls looking for the payoff slot. "Seen some of that cr—some of them tunes lay on the shelf for years, then some yokel puts it out

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and—wham! In three weeks, it's Number One! Ya know, like "Goodnight Irene".

"I suppose you're right, Clark. But why don't we sit down and talk about it?"

Mollie could have sworn she saw him wink, ever so slightly, in her direction. But maybe it was just his quick laughing eyes.

"Hell, yes!" Clark was almost shouting with eagerness now. "What're we standing out *here* for?" Grabbing Dos' arm, he propelled him toward the inner office.

At the door, Dos turned to Mollie, who silently watched the confused proceedings. "You'll be here for a span, won't you, Mollie?"

The fixed smile on Clark's face fell off, leaving his mouth a wide-open, gaping hole.

"Yes," Mollie answered simply and directly.

COMING out of his momentary shock at the realization that his secretary was something more than a fixture attached to a typewriter, Clark started to protest. But as his sharp beady eyes saw the look of understanding that passed between Dos and Mollie, he swallowed the unspoken words, shrugged his shoulders and turned to his desk. For a moment the uncomfortable feeling of being suddenly dropped into an enemy camp started his eyes blinking like a ticker-tape while his fingers played nervously at the confusion of papers on his desk. Then, with abrupt determination, he spun in his chair to face Dos.

"Oh—sorry, friend. Have a chair." He made an unconvincing gesture at rising, but before his lumpy frame could burrow out of the twin grooves so lovingly molded into the sweat-stained leather, Dos had sat down across from him.

"Now," continued Clark decisively. "Now let's get on the ball. This doesn't happen very often to a newcomer, but I can see you know your business. And that's why I think *we* can do business together." A weak smile, inspired by what he apparently considered a clever play on words, crawled across his lips. It died without leaving a trace of amusement on the rest of his face. "Now maybe you got a tune here. Of course, I'll have to work on it to get it on the sheet—plugs, records, and a coupla gimmicks—but maybe we got something. Now in your case—" His hand swept a road through the dust that had settled on the desk. "In your case we'll write off the additional twenty-five bucks, 'counta maybe we got a real hit here, and—hey! What the hell kinda belt is that?"

Dos' hand, once again fingering the metal disk, brought a childlike wonder to Clark's hardened eyes.

"Oh, just a little gift from our supervisor," Dos said lightly, closing his hand over the mechanism. "I hesitate to interrupt you, Mr. Clark, but I'm scheduled to return soon—I mean, I have a previous engagement—and I would like to know if you're ready to publish my manuscript. You understand, I'm intensely interested in this transition!"

"Transition?" Clark scowled the word. "Hey, bud, you wrote that tune yourself, didn'tcha? We don't want no suits or funny stuff—".

Dos broke in with a low, resonant laugh. "Transition, not 'transposition', Mr. Clark. No—" he continued seriously, "this is my melody. You need have no concern on that score. I just have to leave in a few moments and I'd like to make the necessary arrangements before it's too—"

"Sure, sure!" Clark had had enough. A screwball if ever he saw

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one. "Hey Mollie!" he yelled across the partition, "where's that contract?"

IN HIS desperation, he'd forgotten he didn't want her to stay. But even Mollie was better around there than this—zombie!

Mollie stood at the door, her full white blouse accenting the slim, graceful lines of a dark, tailored skirt. "You have it right there, on your desk, Mr. Clark."

He grabbed at the paper. "Damned if I don't! Okay, kid—okay. I got it." He brushed at the air impatiently, dismissing her.

Mollie walked slowly back to her desk, and waited.

She couldn't make out too much of the conversation that followed. Clark had lowered his voice to an unctuous, intimate whisper and the only words that drifted into her room were the ordinary trade-labels of the profession. A few silent moments riveted her attention completely. She stopped typing to listen. Dos must be reading the contract now, she thought. Maybe—maybe— But it didn't happen. She slumped dejectedly in her chair as she heard Clark say, "Right here, friend —on this line. That's all you have to do, and you're in the dough!"

For an instant Mollie could have sworn she heard the purring of a sleek, fat tom-cat.

Somehow the customary formalities didn't seem necessary to Mollie when Dos came out of Clarke's office about ten minutes later. When he said, "Ready?" she backed away from the desk, set the chair neatly into the kneehole groove and went for her hat. Without stopping to put it on she joined him at the door. He had already opened it for her. With a quick glance back at Clark, silhouetted in the doorway to his office, she called pleasantly, "'Night, Mr. Clark. See you tomorrow."

"Okay, kid," he answered, with a looseness that didn't even move his lips. Nothing else about him moved either. He just stood there, the weight of his confusion too heavy to stir him into any movement.

Outside the office Mollie turned to Dos.

"You wanted to talk to me?" she asked.

Dos answered by merely slipping his arm into hers and piloting her down the corridor to the staircase. His quick black eyes scanned the dim lit, dusty corridor.

"Not right here, certainly. Do you?" As he spoke he shook his head in a vigorous denial, as though the gesture itself might help dispel the squalor of their surroundings. "Surely there must be a—" He hesitated with the same shyness that marked their first meeting. "—a, well, shall we say, a more conducive locale for conversation?"

Mollie laughed softly. "My, but you write fancy lyrics, Mr. Dos!" Then, more seriously, "Yes, there is a better place than this to talk. We can have a cup of coffee down the street in the sandwich shop."

"Excellent idea. Let's go!"

ELBOWING their way through the crowded street made any further conversation impossible, and it wasn't until they were inside the door of the long, narrow lunch-room that Dos spoke again. Mollie was headed for one of the small, open tables opposite the counter. He pulled back lightly at her arm.

"I think one of those cubicles in the rear might be better, don't you?" A slight nod indicated the direction.

"You mean those booths?" She eyed him with amused suspicion. "Well, soft

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light in a beanery! I suppose I can take it if you can!"

He edged her forward to the last in the long row of mahogany partitions and waited until she had slid across the red plastic seat covers to seat himself on the opposite side. It was the first time she was able to look directly at him at eye level, and it was easier to do than she'd even imagined. He seemed to enjoy his point of view as well. A few moments and suddenly the wordless introductions were broken by simultaneous laughter.

"Who *are* you, anyway, Mister Akbar Dos?" Mollie punctuated each word vigorously. "Don't tell me we have a new nation in the U. N.!"

"The U. N.?" His deep-set eyes squinted into narrow, probing slits. "Oh—oh, yes, of course! I remember!"

"You *remember?* Have you been away?"

Dos smiled good-naturedly. "Removed—a bit, I should say. But, Mollie," he added quickly, "I haven't much time now, and there's so much you can tell me." His eyes darted quickly to his belt, then up again to her. "So little time—and I'm so vitally interested in your profession. I *must* know—" His voice trailed off on the far-away look in his eyes, like strings on a soaring kite.

"Honestly, Mr. Dos!—"

"Can't you say "Akbar—*please?*" He was with her again, in another one of those quick change of moods she now was almost ready to expect.

"Okay," she conceded easily, "Akbar it will be! But really, Akbar, what in heaven's name are you talking about? In my line of work we'd say, 'I just don't dig you, man!' You're a strange one!"

"And you, little girl—a very lovely one!"

Mollie laughed, with pleasant overtones of feminity. "Now, that may be fast, but at least it's familiar! But listen, Akbar, that song of yours—it *is* yours, isn't it?" She was deadly serious now. "I wouldn't want—"

"Of course it is, Mollie! I've heard that so many times since I came back from—out of—since I entered your office. Is there something strange in writing one's *own* song?"

"No, I guess not. It's just that—well, in *our* office— She cut herself off abruptly. "Never mind. Forget it. What I want to know is—"

A WAITER suddenly materialized at the side of the booth. "What'll it be, folks?"

"Just two coffees, please," Mollie answered casually.

Dos looked up at the man. "The—compensation?"

Fully prepared for the reaction to come, Mollie stepped in, smiling. "He means the check, Sammy." Then, to Dos, "But you don't have to pay for it now, Akbar!"

"I'd rather," he answered, reaching into his pocket.

"Okay, bud. Have it your way. It's twenty cents." He held out his hand.

Dos produced two dimes. "Will these do?"

Sammy's head jerked sharply towards Mollie. "What's he usually carry, Mollie? A penny bank?"

"Never you mind, Sam. Java on the double!" she mimicked. "And we're in a hurry!"

As Sammy shrugged, Mollie looked back at Dos. "Now, where were we?"

Several deep wrinkles suddenly appeared at right angles to the stranger's straight black brows. "We really must hurry now, Mollie. My signal's been called and I'll be lost in lim—. You wanted *me* to tell you something?" He put the question mark squarely on the word.

"Yes, Akbar. Tell me, did you sign

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that contract?" Her eyes were steady and intent on him.

"Why, yes! That's the customary procedure, isn't it?"

"With the customary music-publisher, yes! But Clark!" A sudden weariness seemed to fall across her face, dimming her eager eyes and tugging down at the corners of her full red lips. "Oh, I'm so sorry. That's such a beautiful tune!"

"But what is wrong, Mollie? I'm sure I acted properly."

"The money, Akbar! He'll never give you—"

"But it isn't the money I'm interested in!" Dos interrupted sharply. "That is, I wasn't until now—now that—" His voice fell off as his eyes darted sharply around the room. "Mollie, what is that instrument over there?" He indicated a spot in the room about ten feet away.

"A cigarette machine. Haven't you ever seen one? They're everywhere!"

"No, as a matter of fact, I haven't. Would you mind if I scanned it?"

Mollie smiled indulgently, a flicker of amusement flashing across her face. "Why, of course. Why not?"

As Dos edged out of the bench, Sammy appeared with the coffee. "Coffee for two, Mollie. Your java."

"Thanks, Sammy." Mollie said, reaching for the sugar jug.

She must have been stirring the cup for two or three minutes. Lost in thought, she couldn't recall just how long it was before she suddenly realized Akbar should have returned to the table. Dropping the spoon, she slid to the edge of the booth and looked down the aisle.

IT WAS empty. No one was anywhere near the cigarette machine. She jumped up from the seat and searched the adjoining booths. Two down an elderly man hunched intently over a plate of ham and eggs. Sammy was back of the counter, playing matchsticks with his assistant. The sandwich shop attracted little evening trade. There wasn't another soul in the place.

"Sammy—Sammy—" Mollie called frantically. "Did you see that fellow who was in the booth with me?"

"Geez, no! What he do—blow?"

"Joe," she addressed the counter-boy, "have you been at the counter for the past ten minutes?"

"Sure, Mollie. Why?"

"See anyone leave? A tall, dark-haired fellow?"

"Been lookin' right out here for the past two hours, kid. Nobody's left since you guys came in. That the bloke you mean?"

"Yes," Mollie said, slow enough to sandwich a few ideas inside the word. "You sure you didn't see him leave?"

"No, kid. Not this way. And there ain't no other."

"Paid his check, though!" Sammy put in, with a one-sided smile that could have meant anything. And probably did. "Bru-ther! Ya sure get 'em looney in your racket, Mollie!"

Mollie didn't bother answering. Confusion and embarrassment made her want to get out fast. She ran back to her booth, grabbed her purse and started for the door.

"Think nothing of it, boys," she called from the tiny vestibule. "Barnum and Bailey have him booked solid. New disappearing act!"

"Mollie! Mollie! Get a load of *this!* Clark bounced into the office with enough vigor to rattle the flimsy partitions into a chorus of echoing excitement. "We're in, sister! We're *in!*

Mollie followed him to his room as he dumped the stack of trade-papers on the desk, sending a flurry of loose clippings to the floor. Shiny beads of perspiration made tiny pools in the

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dark folds of his upper lip. His forehead was thick with an oily wetness. As he flipped the pages with impatient haste his fat red tongue whipped out to catch the ticklish drops as they slid down. Tearing the edges of a half dozen pages on the way, he came to what he was after. His sticky palms slapped down like suction cups on the double spread.

"Read it, kid! It's terrific!" He was shouting now, his eyes as well as his voice. The dark blue sport shirt, pasted against his almost femininely fat chest, rose and fell with his sharp, excited breathing.

"NEW HIT HYPOS MUSIC BIZ! "SWAMI TUNE KEEPS ALLEY BUZZING!—UNKNOWN SOCKO!" Clark read, punctuating each headline with his own enthusiasm as his bulging eyes jumped back and forth across the pages.

Without raising his head from the fascination of his own professional lingo, he reached out and grabbed Mollie's arm, pulling her closer to the desk. "Ever see anything like it, kid? Sensational! We *hit!* And ya ain't seen nuthin' yet! Get a load of this one!"

DISREGARDING everything else on his desk, he pushed aside the paper he had been reading, sending a few more letters sailing to the floor, and fished out a second trade-paper. This was a small, smooth sheet, with a screaming red masthead and blatant headlines.

"Looka this, Mollie!" He began reading again. "L O S T WORLD CLIMBS TO NUMBER 3 IN RECORD LEAP. PREDICT ONE SPOT NEXT WEEK. That's showin' 'em, ain't it, kid?" he gloated, turning his full, satisfied face towards Mollie for the first time since he'd begun the mad recital. For a quick moment he looked like a baked apple to her, with its shiny sugar coating running down off the sides.

She smiled weakly. "Yes, I guess it *is* pretty terrific, Mr. Clark. But what are you going to do about *this* little item?"

A half-amused, half-suspicious glint flickered in her eyes as she picked up the paper and read, "MYSTERY WRITER STILL MYSTERY. CLARK FAILS TO PRODUCE WONDER BOY OF MUSIC BIZ." She read on. "Reporters still find Sam Clark, prez of Clark Publishers, mum on subject of who wrote Lost World, latest hit on way to break all sheet sale records. At any interview in Clark's office, this mail-order publisher told newsmen and Deejays clammering for an inside line on weird ballad sweeping nation that writer, one 'Akbar Dos', was unknown hillbilly with 'burning desire to write something better'. Despite the obvious skepticism of his audience, Clark stuck to his story. When Ward Mailler, top-flight Gotham deejay, offered five-hundred dollars for first air interview with mystery song-writer, Clark double-talked business of contractual—"

"Okay, okay, kid. That's enough. I get it." he interrupted. "So what? So the guy doesn't show? What's wrong in that? Maybe he's bashful. There ain't no sin in that. And not one of those jerks could dig up *anything* like that goddamn tune! They're dyin' to hang me on stealin' it. But this one even Tschaikowsky didn't write!" When he said it, it sounded like 'Shy-cow-skee', late of the Notre Dame backfield. "Forget it. The tune's a smash. We'll clean up. Three hit records already—all 'A' sides. And damn-it, it's sellin' sheets too! Bet it'll be a standard, fer crissakes! They're singin' the damn thing in schools!

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Some stuff about new harmonics, or somethin'. I'll be a—"

"But how are you going to pay Mr. Dos if he doesn't come back?" Mollie persisted. "There must be quite a bit of money due him."

"Who the hell's fault is that? Hey, kid," Clark's eyes narrowed into an accusing squint. "Whose side are *you* on, anyway? You're workin' for *me,* ain'tcha? We'll clean up on this thing. And you'll get yours too. It's a deal!"

Apparently the idea surprised even Clark, as he said it. He stopped abruptly, widened his eyes while his mouth fell open loosely, and spurted, "Yea, kid, that's what I'll do! I'll cut ya in on it. Bonus or somethin'. Like all the big-shot publishers work. How's that?"

HE GLOWERED at her, with a lasciviousness that could almost have rape in the offing. With Clark, the curves on a coin and the silk in a bill could produce the same effect.

Mollie demured politely.

"Thank you, Mr. Clark, but I still think it's pretty sad we can't find Akbar—Mr. Dos, I mean. After all, it is his first published song, and he should know what a hit he has! Aren't you even worried about him? Something could have happened, you know. He seemed like such a stranger around here!"

Clark exhaled audibly—a tired, long breath, walked around the desk to his chair and let his weight pour like lumpy batter into the seat.

"Honest, Mollie," he pleaded, "I don't getcha. Here we gotta chance to tie into some real dough—you and me—both of us. And you go round with a face that's playin' Hearts and Flowers, just because some yokel doesn't know enough to come in outa the rain to collect a few bucks!"

"Just how many bucks, Mr. Clark?" he ventured cautiously.

His face struck out belligerently. "What's it to— What'dya want to know for? Got somethin' on your mind, kid?"

"No-oo," she answered slowly. "I was just wondering what sort of contract you gave him. That's all."

"And what's that to *you?* The regular contract! Nothin' diff'rent. An' you were right here when he signed it!"

Then, relaxing a little, he added, "Honest, kid, there's no sense gettin' yourself in an uproar. The whole deal's strictly legit. I leveled with him all right. Nuthin' to worry about. 'Cause I know you kinda went for the guy a little. Nuthin' wrong in that. I was young once, myself." He chuckled painfully. "But this is bigger'n that! We got the Number One hit in the country! He'll come back. They all do. Wait'll he hears it!"

Mollie looked off into space. "'Til he hears it— I wonder."

"Besides," Clark went on, ignoring her musing, "you oughta feel sorry for *me,* not that punk! Looka the dough I'm losin' while he's off sleepin'. All those air-shots. Maybe a theatre date. Who knows? I gotta gimmick for the first time in my life, and the gimmick blows! Whatta lousy break!"

His fat folds fell tiredly, one over the other.

The sharp jangle of Mollie's telephone summoned her back to her desk, while Clark stewed audibly in his own self-pity.

"Yes—yes, sir," he could hear her say. "This *is* Clark Publishers." She listened. "Yes, 'Lost Worlds' is our tune." More silence. "Well, he's not here at the moment, but we expect him in town within a few days." A longer silence followed. "Certainly, I'll

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tell Mr. Clark. Magnum Pictures. I understand. Good-bye, sir."

Clark's belly was pressed tight against his desk as he leaned forward to get Mollie's report on the call.

"Who was that?" he blurted.

"Magnum Pictures, Mr. Clark," she answered, a smile teasing at the corners of her lips. "They want to use 'Lost World' for thematic music in a movie based on the tune."

"Yeah, yeah—" he urged.

"But Akbar Dos *must* appear to sign *their* contract."

Clark slumped helplessly over his desk. "Oh, my God!"

AS MOLLIE pulled the key out of the lock and reached listlessly for the light-switch on the wall she could feel nothing but an overwhelming tiredness. The day had been a record-breaker for heat. The phone hadn't stopped ringing on 'Lost World' business more than ten minutes at a stretch all day. The smoke and smell of everyone who had entered the office stayed on in little fenced-off areas, where each had last stood, like a bird's-eye view of a farming state. The heavy, oppressive air in the office, along with the noise and confusion, still clung to her, despite the long walk home through the park. As she locked the door and went to the closet to change her burning shoes for a pair of yellow straw beach sandals she felt a selfish relief in the recollection that her mother had arranged to spend the evening out, with one of her friends. If she didn't have to talk to another soul, or answer another phone for a year, that would be soon enough.

With a long sigh she stretched out on the cool chintz sofa in the tidy, dim-lit living room. A warm breeze filtered through the half-closed Venetian blinds, and as Mollie closed her eyes she played with the comforting thought that the evening promised to bring a break in the heat spell.

Almost out of a dream—although she was sure she hadn't dozed off—she was suddenly aware of not being alone in the room. But just as it had been once before, the realization wasn't frightening now. Not the kind of fright that makes one bolt upright and grab for a gun, or the leg of a chair. Except for harried moments with temperamental vocalists and noisy musicians, the memory of Akbar Dos had scarcely left her mind.

Slowly, almost hopefully, she opened her eyes, slid her feet to the floor and sat up.

He was there, standing between the arch of the small entrance hall and living room, one hand resting against the molding, the other on his belt-buckle. There was a certain relaxed ease in the posture which could have meant he'd been there for hours, instead of minutes, or seconds—so far as she knew.

"Don't you believe in door bells, Mr. Dos?" Mollie asked with a bit too much courtesy.

"The door was open, Mollie. I didn't frighten you, did I?" His concern was genuine, albeit coming as an afterthought.

"Come now, Peter Pan, I locked the door myself when I came in. What are you trying to sell me this time?" She laughed softly.

"Try it yourself, why don't you?" he persisted.

MOLLIE walked to the door. "Okay, fella. You win again! It is open, but I still say I locked it. We'll get to that later. But now that you're here, how about sitting down and letting me in on some of this hokus-pokus you're up to? You've got a long bill of explanations due me, you know that, don't you?"

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The question went unanswered, except for a smile, as Mollie indicated one of the two overstuffed chairs, now neatly covered in a bright summer cretonne. Dos sat down. She took the high winged-back to the right of it.

The quiet room, lighted by only the one lamp which operated from the wall switch Mollie had snapped on when she came in, could have taken more light now. But she didn't do anything about it. It was cooler this way. And besides, this man didn't seem to call for blazing lights any more than he fitted in with the overpowering conversation she was used to hearing in her office all day.

Reaching over to the coffee table, she picked up a cigarette from the blue and white Wedgewood case, flicked the table-lighter, and settled back comfortably. Against the deep green of the linen slip-cover her hair looked like a golden version of candy-cotton, soft and wispy.

There was a new softness in Akbar's eyes as he watched her, grateful for the silence that gave him a chance to gather his thoughts. To Mollie, he was like a store-window mannequin, slowly coming to life.

"Mollie," he began hesitantly, "you're going to have to help me. This escape into a world that lives no more for me—"

"Akbar, forgive me for interrupting. But you're just going to have to stop talking in riddles if we're going to get any place with this conversation!" She leaned forward, speaking now with a deep intensity. "Just *who* are you? Where did you come from? Why the song—all of a sudden? Where in the world did you go when you vanished out of that coffee shop?"

"It hasn't really been fair to you, has it, Mollie?" There was a rich, intimate compassion in his voice. "I've had all the answers, up to now. You've had none. But I will try to make you understand. First, though, tell me—has my melody been heard?"

Mollie shot forward in her chair. "Been *heard?* Akbar, where have you been? It's the greatest thing since—" Her head fell back in laughter. "—since *Mairzy Doats!*"

"Since—*what?*"

"Never mind. We'd be here forever if I tried to explain *that* to you! But maybe you can get this. Your tune is the biggest hit in this country today. It's bigger than anything that's happened since 'The Birth of a Nation' or the home permanent. Clark's making a fortune on it, and you should be, too. But where are you? Off in a cloud of—say, what are you off in anyway? Seems like that's where I came in. Or you did! Bru-ther, can you mix up a gal!"

"You mean my tune's a success?" he asked, incredulously.

"You know, Akbar, I'm either awfully stupid or terribly naive. And that's not easy when you work for a man like Sam Clark. But I *do* believe you. You really haven't heard the song, have you?"

"No, Mollie. I haven't. I couldn't, where I've been. All waves are lost, long before they span even one time lapse. But let me understand this. You mean I was right when I thought I could still find music, could still bring it back to men living in a world where it had lost its purpose—its meaning—its glorious, tremendous uselessness?"

AKBAR'S hands were gripped tight to the arms of his chair, his elbows back like spread wings, as he pressed his body forward in tense excitement.

"Honestly, Akbar, I don't know what you're talking about, but if you still doubt you've written a hit song, turn on that radio." Her hand shot out

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in the direction of a small, white machine tucked into the niche of a tier-top table alongside his chair. "Listen, Akbar, listen! You *must* know what you've got!"

But Mollie didn't wait for him to do it. She jumped up and turned the switch and, before she had a chance to adjust the dial, the second eight bars of *Lost World* swelled out with the coming on of the power. Softly at first, and then so loud she had to turn the volume down.

"Hear it? That's one station—only one. Now I'll get another!" She turned the dial about a quarter inch. Again—*Lost World*. This time the lyric. "And that's not all! Wait a second. There's at least four on at once! She switched rapidly back and forth across a cacophony of words, dialogue, laughs, and there it was again, on a third station.

She turned the switch off, cutting the tune abruptly.

"Do you need any more proof? It's everywhere. On the stage, on TV. Good heavens, someone even wants to do a picture on it!"

She fell back into her chair wearily. "And here you sit, dreaming some double-talk that sounds like a Crusade to Mars when you have a million dollars in your lap—with Clark holding a phony contract that will gyp you out of it! Believe me, I've seen everything now!"

"But, Mollie, money wasn't vital—then. When I sent in the song. I couldn't use your kind, there. But now—"

He jumped up, took one long step to her and bent over close to her face. "Mollie—" He spoke with a hoarse intensity. "Do you mean I should *not* have signed that contract? That the currency we need to exist in this span will not be ours, under its terms?"

In his excitement he had slipped back into his own strange vernacular, but not fast enough to check himself at the word *we*. It came too easily for him. Mollie didn't bat an eye. To her it was a beautiful word, well worth dwelling on.

"That's right, Akbar. *Any* contract with that guy is no good. Yours isn't worth the paper its signed on. The paper, at least, costs two cents. But you signed it. That's what's killing me now!"

"Did I?" A slow, cunning smile worked up from his lips, across the tiny laugh lines on his cheeks, and bounced off into his eyes, in a shatter of mischief.

Mollie squinted with curiosity. "What do you mean?"

He grabbed her shoulders, his knuckles turning white with the pressure. "Girl! You'll wait here for me, won't you?"

"*Wait* here? For Pete's sake, where are you going now?"

"Will you, darling?" he pressed.

Mollie bit hard into her lower lip. "Ye-es, Akbar, I will. But how long?"

"About ten minutes, that's all. Ten min—"

The closing door cut the last word in two. He was gone.

THERE was too much to try to figure out. Mollie preferred to blank her mind to everything except the passing of the time. He said ten minutes. She'd give him twenty. If he didn't show by then, she'd be the one to do the disappearing act! More out of habit than any urgent need, she wandered about the room, moving chairs by the inch, fluffing up the sofa pillows and straightening a few picture frames. Anything that wouldn't take a gram of thought. Her mind was whirling like a pin-wheel in a wind tunnel.

She raised her wrist cautiously and

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looked at her watch. The ten minutes were up. Give him another five. She went into the kitchen, opened a bottle of coke and was reaching for a glass when her hand stopped in mid-air. "No," she thought, smiling to herself, "I'll try drinking it from the bottle, like a kid. Give me something to do. See if I don't get my tongue caught, this time."

With the smile not quite faded, she started back for the living room.

"Amused, Mollie?"

He was sitting in exactly the same position, on the same chair. What had happened from the time he jumped up and left until now might never have been, judging from his relaxed composure. But she was getting used to this crazy pattern of things by now. And what amazed her even more, she was accepting it!

"Not you, Akbar. I was just laughing at myself, trying to drink this coke out of the bottle. Never could, but I sure keep on trying!"

She sat down, placing the bottle in a large, flat ashtray on the table.

"Did you get what you were after?" She tried to make the question nonchalant, like this sort of thing happens every day. But her steady, searching eyes didn't fool either of them.

"Yes, I did. You won't understand how, so soon, but you will, in time. in *your* time, that is. Please, Mollie, don't worry."

"It isn't worry, exactly, Akbar. It's just the strangeness of everything. The strangeness of *you!* You know, you haven't really told me anything yet." Her voice was almost pleading, like a child who's been teased too long. The elusive prize could well be not worth the effort.

"I know that, my dear. And that's why I'm going to explain it all to you, right now."

He walked over to her chair. "But it will be a great deal easier for both of us if you sit here, close to me," he added, out of the warm smile that flushed his face.

"Okay!" Mollie returned gayly. "Now we're getting places! Just start talking!"

THEY WERE seated side by side when he began.

"Maybe you'd call it a difference in the concept of time, Mollie. Yours and mine—" he started slowly. "You've seen a little of it in your comic books, but this isn't comedy. It's something rather tragic, I'd say, that is destined to happen to all mankind, 500 years from now. It's something that almost happened to me, because I'm one man out of that world—500 years from now!"

There was a fixed, glazed stare in Mollie's eyes as she drew back in her chair.

"Don't be frightened, darling. It's nothing I can't change by turning off these dials." He pointed to his belt buckle. "And stay here with you—with our song."

"But—but I don't understand, Akbar!" Mollie cried helplessly.

"Try to see it this way, then, my dear." He leaned forward towards her, clasping both his hands over hers. "What is time, anyway? A moment of pleasure is so fast it's gone before we know it. A moment of pain so long that some men relive their entire life, during its horror. The world you live in is destined for much pain. Time will be measured in long moments, long years. The pleasure that is beauty, that is art, music—and love—will be measured in short moments. And so, all these will have been forgotten long before industry, invention and destruction have taken over. Man will be a machine, a robot, thorough, efficient, inhuman; without beauty, without

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love. Even as I was, before I returned to find you."

He sank back in his chair. "That is the world I have come from, Mollie, with the help of this 'gadget', as you call it, on my belt. But I was one, alone, left with a song in my soul. I thought that if I could hear it, if I could carry it over—to them—I might restore something of this lost world to men incapable of warmth, softness and sympathy. But I learned on my return there, that man cannot live in the future and still make something out of the past. I have to stay here with you. I *want* to stay here with you. So that we, in our own small way, can reshape a different kind of future. Maybe not for all of mankind, but certainly for me—for us. *Lost World* isn't going to be our only song. There'll be others, for you and me, together."

Again he reached her hand. "May I, Mollie? May I stay?"

"Oh, Akbar, of course! Of course! But can you? Can you break away, detach yourself, or whatever it is you do with that gadget? Can you live again, in *this* world?"

Akbar chuckled. "Don't you worry about that. There's only one answer I need from you, to make everything possible."

Taking her hands in his, he raised her gently out of the chair. As they stood there, close to each other, their eyes spoke the wordless prelude to a new song, one they knew they'd sing together, from this day forward. Slowly, tenderly, his arms reached around her.

"You do love me, Mollie? Say it—now. You do love me!"

MOLLIE wasn't concerned about time anymore. She found her answer in the age-old way—on her tiptoes, her lips pressed close to his.

Moments of tenderness, filled with soft whispered half-words. The first ecstatic realization of being one with another. And then...

She backed away abruptly. "Akbar! The contract! We must do something about it. We can't let that man ruin us!"

He shook the soft curls loose at the nape of her neck. "That's going to be well taken care of, my darling. Well taken care of." He padded each word with purpose and meaning. "Will you be at your office tomorrow at noon?"

"Sure I will! Will you be there?"

"Yes."

"Now we're *really* getting places!"

They both were laughing, with a sort of hysterical relief. Placing his fine, strong hands around her waist, he lifted her up off the floor and kissed her again, hard on the lips.

"Until tomorrow, my love..."

"Until tomorrow!"

He was out of the door before Mollie had taken her first deep, long breath.

Landing in the office the next morning could have taken instruments for anyone but Mollie, who knew the field so well. The fog-bank of smoke pouring from Clark's room made a London night look like a Pasadena postcard. Like Pinocchio's nose, his cigars grew longer and stronger with each new lie. Now the smell of them preceded him by about 15 minutes. Mollie could sniff her way to that office, blindfold.

"That you, kid?" he called as the door opened.

"Yes, Mr. Clark," she answered mechanically. "You're early today, aren't you? Gee, it's stuffy in here. Mind if I open your window?"

"Sure, go 'head. Guess I forgot about the heat. Been up to my ears!

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in figures. Say, kid, we sure got a hit on our hands! Terrific!" He never looked up once as he spoke. There was a deadly fascination to the papers strewn haphazardly across his desk.

With her hands still holding the frame of the raised window, Mollie filled her lungs with what little fresh air could be siphoned out of the hot, sultry street. Without turning around she spoke calmly.

"Akbar Dos will be in today, at noon."

Clark's head shot up like a jack-in-the-box, leaving his mouth hanging open, stupidly.

"Wha-aa?"

Mollie turned around. "Akbar Dos. You remember? The writer of *Lost World?*" The questions were lifted gently on an ascending note of suspicious cunning. "He's coming to the office today."

"How you know? When'd he call? Why didn'tcha tell me?" His loose cheeks bounced frantically with each word.

"Sorry, sir. I didn't have time to tell you. You see, he called me last night."

"Where?"

"At my home."

"At your *home?*" His mouth twisted.

"Yes, my home." Mollie answered politely. Somewhere someone had told her about the strongest defense being a strong offense. Besides, he couldn't bother her any more, anyway.

Her poise threw him way off.

"Okay kid. Nothin' wrong in that, I s'pose." He tried to make it sound like that could happen to anyone. His voice succeeded, after a fashion, but his eyes didn't quite make it. They darted back and forth under blinking lids, searching madly for something to focus on. Mollie wouldn't do. Her calm gaze was too blinding for him.

HE LOOKED down at his desk and started to fumble a few papers. "Tell you what he wants, Mollie?" "A little. Something about his contract with you. He wants to see it and figure out what you owe him."

Clark chewed at his lower lip. From the look on the rest of his face, it didn't taste too good.

"All right then, that's fine. We'll get it all cleared away."

He spoke with a glib, feigned ease. "But, a—Mollie!" he blurted, looking up at her, "gotta nidea! Why don't we do this thing right? Real McCoy. It's big business now and we gotta treat it like big business. Get Sacco on the phone. Tell him to be here, too. We'll have a conference!" He lit on the word like a swatter on a fly, holding it down triumphantly.

"You mean your lawyer?" Mollie asked incredulously.

"Sure. Why not? We gotta do this thing right, kid. For everybody." A fat grin oozed from his taut, beefy lips.

"As you say, Mr. Clark."

At her desk Mollie picked up the phone and dialed the number.

It was 12:15 before all four were seated in Clark's office. With all the gallantry that accompanied the finding of the Holy Grail, Clark had secured an extra over-stuffed leather chair and offered it to Dos. Sacco and Mollie used the two straight-back wooden ones in the room.

Leaning back pompously behind his desk, Clark wiped his oily bald-spot with a soggy grey handkerchief mined from the depth of his back pocket with much grunting and a few short, nervous coughs.

"Well, gentlemen—and ladies," he began theatrically, "this is a big moment for all of us. It isn't every day that a new songwriter, without a tune to his name, can take this country by

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storm, and knock the daylights out of Porter and Berlin! And it ain't every-day—" Beginning to tire of the masquerade, himself, his grammar went slipping down with his cascading enthusiasm, "—that a publisher will give a new guy a chance. But that's me. That's Clark. Always ready to give a guy a break. And we got a hit! Got the biggest hit this side of *South Pacific!*" He liked that. A sharp jerk of approval on the part of his head attested to it.

"Hey, Sam," Sacco put in somewhat disgustedly, "Cut out the horsin', willya? I gotta deal on at one. Let's get this over with. You can unveil the body later."

CLARK shot a mean eye in the direction of this undersized, dapper, too-neat man. "What's eatin' ya, Joe? You got paid last month, didn'tcha?"

"Humph." The grunt practically put a notary public's stamp on the amount. Down to the last penny. And there apparently weren't too many across the decimal point either.

"Okay, have it your way," Clark conceded. "Mollie," he said, breaking in on a string of smiles that danced playfully between the girl and Dos. "Get that contract, willya?" The courtesy was addressed to the songwriter rather than the secretary. Like a "see-how-nice-I-can-be-to-your-girl" afterthought.

"Yes, sir," Mollie answered pertly.

Nobody said anything as Mollie fished into the creeking oakwood file cabinet. She pulled out three of four mail folders before she found the right one.

"Here, Mr. Clark, your contract folder." She placed it before him.

Clark turned back the finger-stained yellow cover dramatically. "Won't be long now, Dos, my boy. Won't be long now, and give you your first real dough!"

For the first time since thanking Clark for the borrowed chair, Dos spoke. But his words were aimed at the lawyer.

"Mr. Sacco," he started, "a contract to be valid must be signed by both parties. Is that not the custom here?"

"Sure, kid. Sure," the man answered quickly.

Clark's eyes darted darkly between Dos and Sacco, like a net man watching a tennis match. "Sure. Sure," he echoed. "What about it? I signed it, didn't I?" he challenged.

"*You* did, Clark." Dos smiled.

Clark hunched over the papers, flipping away a half-dozen impatiently. Suddenly he stopped at the printed form in front of him.

"Here it is!" he cried, his voice thick with panic. He threw open the cover page, dropped his eyes to the bottom line—and froze.

Still not believing what he saw—or didn't see—he turned back to the first page, obviously to check on the title. Maybe this wasn't the right contract. It was. The information was draped like a funeral wreath, across his face, practically hanging off his ear lobes.

"You—you—" he stammered, groping for expression. Mollie's presence inhibited the easiest words he knew from slipping off his paled, dry lips.

"Whatsammatter, Sam? See a ghost?" Sacco ventured uneasily.

"The sonuva—the guddamn contract ain't—ain't *signed!*"

MOLLIE turned sharply to Akbar, her eyes widened with wonder.

"Ain't signed by *who?*" Sacco persisted.

"By *him!*" Clark was shouting now. "Who the hell else would sign it, you big lug!"

Dos uncrossed his legs and started

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up from the chair. "Are you ready, Mollie?" he asked softly. "We have much business to attend to."

Mollie returned his warm smile. "Let's go!"

The floor of the ocean didn't groan any heavier when they laid the Atlantic Cable than Clark's office did as Sacco and he stood there, watching the other two disappear across the outer door.

Sammy's eyes were clouded with suspicion as two customers walked past the counter towards the rear booths.

"Not again!" he shouted, throwing his water-soaked hands in the air.

"Oh, don't you worry, Sammy-boy," Mollie came back lightly, "I've got him on a leash this time!"

Akbar patted Mollie's head with an understanding usually reserved for the kindergarten applicant and smiled to Sammy, "That's what *she* thinks!"

Sammy laughed. "You got something there, Mister. Keep 'em guessin'!"

With his arm through hers, Akbar piloted Mollie to the same booth they had shared before.

After the coffee had been served, Mollie settled back comfortably. Akbar crossed his arms on the table top, slouched forward a little, and watched her.

"Okay, fella," she said, with a flippant wink, "I'm ready. Now you can tell me. Just *how* did that contract come to be unsigned. I know you signed it, and what makes it funnier, you know you signed it!"

He brushed some nonexistent flecks of dust from his coat sleeve.

"It's simple, my dear," he began, nonchalantly, "if you happen to exist in the year 2472."

"Ye-es," Mollie chimed in. "I can see it all so clearly! Very simple!" The mischief and mockery in her tone gave her a new sophistication.

HE CHUCKLED. "I changed the ink in the well on his desk to a vaporizing substance the day before the contract was signed. Very simple."

"Bru-ther! How tricky can a man get!" She moved closer to the table. "And then what happened? Clark used that same inkwell all the next day. In fact, ever since. Does that mean everything he's written will disappear?"

"Could be," Akbar said, dreamily.

Mollie eyed him narrowly. "How often does this sort of thing take place, Mr. Dos? If you get lost some night while you're going out for the morning papers, are you liable to turn up in 200 years? I don't think I could wait that long for the funnies!"

"No, dear. No more." He was deadly earnest now. "I'm here to stay now, if you'll have me. To live as you live, in one lifetime. To make all the foolish, human mistakes that make men real—that give a zest, a drive to living. Oh, perhaps I'll know some of the answers most men haven't reached yet, but there's a lot of learning you'll have to help me with. Your world—a stranger one to me than mine is to you. A new world that's really an old one for me, out of my ancestor's past. I have to learn how to make a living—learn your ways—the values here—all those little things we've dispensed with, in another world so perfect it has lost man's need for a heart."

Mollie's hand reached out across the table and closed over his arm. "We'll do it, Akbar—we'll do it! You've had one song—you'll have a dozen more!"

THE END

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READER'S PAGE

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Dear LES:

I just finished strolling through the August issue of FA. Congrats on another fine job! I'm a science-fiction fan from 'way back, and now that vacation's rolled around, I can settle down with my favorite literature and forget Latin, geometry, and all those other little monsters that plague me 40 weeks a year. (I'm a Junior in high school, though I'll never know how I did it.)

But to get back to sf for a minute; just for the record, my first mag of this type was a copy of FA—if I remember rightly, the cover had a drawing of a towering (20-foot or so) young woman snugly fitted with fur-trimmed swim suit, bending over a couple of snow-bound aviators. Despite my parents' disgusted grimaces, I promptly caught "the bug" and ever since have been a close follower of all kinds of sf.

Well, I guess my next job is to rate the stories. Here's the way I call 'em: —"Tomorrow's Shadow"—I think this was the best story in the issue. Stangland had a good idea and developed it *very* intelligently. Flowers for Arthur! John Guinta's illo, though far from Rembrandt, was very good. There's something about his style that gets under my skin. I can't explain it, but I keep turning back to look at it again and again.

"The Man Who Lived Twice"—I darn near rated this first. I'd say it was nearly a tie. A most interesting tale. Art was pretty good, too.

"All Flesh is Brass"—fine. I like stories in which humanity is overcome by products of its own ingenuity. Nice, gory picture by Emsler.

Both "The Yellow Wind" and "Mars Invites You" were fairly good adventure stories. Darned if I can decide. I know one thing, though; nobody can top good ol' Virg Finlay when it comes to *exceptional* illustrations. He's high man in my book. That guy can turn out three-dimensional realism better than any other fellow in the business.

But I'm confused about one thing: in reference to Mr. Mendoza's illo for Dean Evans' yarn—if that contraption in the picture is a "pocket-sized" heat pack, I'll eat my hat. The rest of the thing is O.K., though.

The cover, worried damsels and all, was a real eye-catcher.

As to "Tex" Maddox's letter, I'm afraid I don't agree about book-length novels or continued stories. I am a slow reader as it is and when I pick up a sf mag I like to be able to finish what I begin within a reasonable time. What do you think about it? I, for one, hope you keep the legend "All Stories Complete" on your title page all during the life of FA.

Unlike some readers, I enjoy the feature articles very much.

Well, editor, it's bin real nice a-tawkin' to yuh. You'll hear from me after the September ish comes out.

Bill Wilson
825 Jay Street
Ogdensburg, New York

UNPUBLISHED BURROUGHS?

Dear Sir:

As you are aware, many of your readers are Burroughs fans and each month clamor for more. Now I see in the newspaper that Sol Lesser has secured the screen rights for the next 20 years to his work, *including several unpublished novels, short stories, etc., as well as a great mass of outlines, notes, etc.* Why don't you fellows get on the ball and publish this stuff? Get some competent writer, such as John Coleman Burroughs, John Bloodstone, or even Howard Browne, to work this rough material up into suitable shape, and we'll all owe you a debt of gratitude. Hop to it!

Albert E. Gechter
M.R. 2, Baltimore Drive
Gainesville, Florida

HE WANTS LETTERS

Dear Ed:

First, the letters:

Henry Moskowitz: So what's wrong with Howard Browne?

William Wesley Miller: Oh, well, we all have to go sooner or later.

My good gravy. What happened to all the letters? Can't you get rid of the science notes and have extra space for letters?

I know this is plenty short and it might stand a chance for a filler. If it's printed,

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WILLIAM F. WYDALLIS

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"For every hour I have devoted to the Presto, I find that I have earned an average of $15.20 an hour. I am now convinced that extraordinary money can be made in this safety field. I am devoting more of my time to this product now since I have discovered that the earnings on this item are greater than any item I have handled in the past."

—William F. Wydallis
Van Wert, Ohio

CHARLES KAMA

This Presto salesman from Texas was featured as "Salesman of the Month" on the front cover of a sales magazine. He told the magazine's reporter:

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I am requesting fans to write from 12 years to 14.

Tom Piper
464-19th Street
Santa Monica, California

A TEN-BUCK STING

Dear LES:

Just wanted to tell you how much I enjoy your magazines, both FA and AS. As yet I haven't been able to latch on to one of your new FANTASTIC mags, but I'm still trying. Your covers are improving too. I don't care much for naked girls on a mag cover. Leave that to Petty and Varga—they do it much better.

I have a large collection of mags to dispose of if anyone is interested. The price is 25c apiece. C.O.D. or cash in advance. Most people are worth trusting, but I got stung for $10 once on a similar deal and it made me wary, I guess. Hoping to hear from some mag collectors.

Just keep up the good stories and you'll have a fan for life.

Mrs. Robert Booth
Box 401
Erie, Illinois

QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Ed:

Well! You finally came out with your August issue. It's about time! Why do you come out so much later than your sister mag, AMAZING STORIES?

I just got back from the bookstore; and I bought all the 1951 AMAZINGS I could get; but I still need the January and June issues—can anyone help me? (Fans: just name your price!)

I notice that you very seldom answer the questions you are asked. I think it's kind of rude! But in one of the books I bought, I saw a letter from someone who is smart. He did it this way:

Item one:

Is Stephen Marlowe a pen-name for Milton Lesser?

Item two:

Was "All Heroes Are Hated" Milton Lesser's first printed story?

Item three:

What issue is "So Shall Ye Reap" in?

Item four:

Are you (Howard Browne) Lee Francis?

Item five:

What is the T in STF for?

Item six:

Has Lee Francis ever been in "Men Behind FA or AS?"

Item seven:

Are you really going out of print with the October issue? (I hope not—next to AMAZING, I like you best.)

Item eight:

What happened to the AMAZING STORIES comic book?

Item nine:

(for the readers of this letter, if it's printed)

Does anyone have the following mags for sale:

AS January, June 1951; February 1952
FA All 1951 issues except September
SFQUARTERLY February 1952
FUTURE June 1952

I've got my fingers crossed!

I would like to hear from anyone whose favorite author is Milt Lesser (please).

I would also like to talk to anyone in Oakland who reads AMAZING— my phone is GL 1-6423.

OH! I just finished the story by the great-great one and only, Milton Lesser. It was terrific...I thought. I am a very sarcastic person, but I do like Lesser, very much!

Alfred Perez
2646 Harrison Street
Oakland 11, California

1—Yes. 2—No. 3—August 1947 AS. 4—No. 5—Tific. 6—Yes. 7—This is the October issue. 8—Do you mean AMAZING ADVENTURES? It is doing very well.

HERE'S HENRY AGAIN

Dear LES:

Upon getting the August FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, an idea struck me as to how to improve its cover format. Why not block off the title about three and one half inches from the top? Keep the bottom strip and use it as it has been. That way there would be that block for the cover painting without any lettering whatsoever on it.

Men Behind Fantastic Adventures—this gave me a chuckle. Men? *June* Lurie is a *male?* Anyway, I liked the idea of having something about your filler writers.

While I was glad to note a new John Fletcher story for next issue, it brought this fact to mind: Since 1950, we have been promised stories by L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher (a Harold Shea novel, if I remember correctly), David V. Reed, and lately Lawrence Chandler. I believe you told us to look for the Chandler in the July or August issues, but it was useless. What gives, eh?

By the way, since you have gotten Don Wilcox back again, how about twisting his arm for another "Whispering Gorilla" story?

"The Man Who Lived Twice"—Rog Phillips wrote it. (What more can I say?)

The paradox in which John Cole lived is good. Did he live, for a time, in 1950? Or was he always in 2436—after he awoke, that is?

Reminds me of this paradox: A Cretean once said, "All Creteans are liars." If that were true, then he wasn't telling the truth. If that were true, then all Creteans were *not liars.* If that were true, then he was telling the truth. If he were telling the truth—well, you take it from there.

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"All Flesh Is Brass"—Milt Lesser has come through with another good story. But I think his thinking was wrong. The minds of those mechanical men were copies of human minds. Then they wouldn't have bragged about being of metal; nor could they destroy mankind.

The other stories were good, too.

Popp's cover is the best to date that he has done for FA. Mom said, "Not only are there girls on the cover, but they have something *on*, too."

Illos—John Guinta's was the best one. I've seen his work before, and I think this one of his best jobs. Three pages of letters only? Comments:

Donald Honan—You've quite a way to come in science fiction. It is pretty well accepted that GSF, ASF, TFOF&SF, and F are the *top four magazines*.

That story by Paul W. Fairman in the September AS? His character, Saturday? Is this a satire on private eyes? And Max Thursday?

Oh, yeah! I want a bigger FA. What about it?

And I want some *good* fantasy. Now they're putting fantasy in AS and stf in FA.

That seems to be about all—for this month. See you next month. Until then, I remain

Henry Moskowitz
Three Bridges
New Jersey

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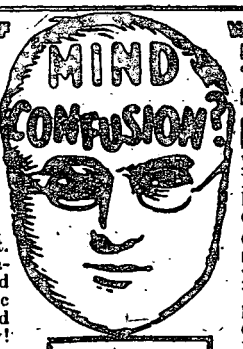

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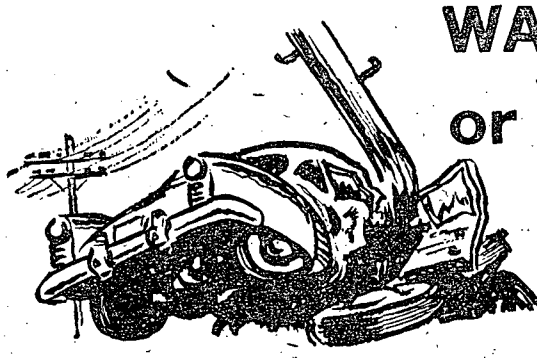


WAR, MURDER or STUPIDITY?

By Frederic Booth

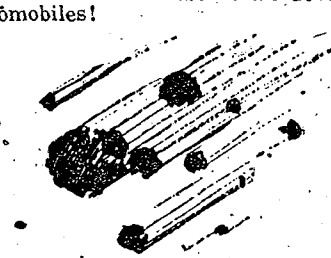
A HISTORIAN of the future examining the culture of the twentieth century, combing through the yellowed records and noting the evidences of everyday living, might be hard put to explain some peculiar facets of American transportation, especially since in *his* times things will be so differently organized. He might observe that personal transportation was provided for almost every individual by a four-wheeled vehicle driven by an internal combustion engine of ridiculously large power and ridiculously high speeds on dangerous roadways—resulting in enormous casualties each year. "To what end?" he might ask himself. "Didn't these people have any over-all transport sense?" he would be certain to ask.

Appealing to a juvenile and undisciplined love of speed for speed's sake and not recognizing the limitations of human skill and controllability, manufacturers produce vehicles of excessive power, wasteful of resources and costly to life and limb. Why?

Fortunately, this is changing and the future will see many more changes. For one thing, the small car, a recognized necessity for people as strongly travel-minded as ourselves, is being developed with most of the advantages of the big one—except speed and power. This is necessary to conserve resources, of course, and to permit everyone to drive. Perhaps the greatest threat to present motoring and the most promising and encouraging aspect of future travel, is the coming helicopter which will definitely be the "car" of the future. The automobile as we know it is doomed. In cities, it has reached the saturation point at which its operation is inefficient, and it is known that transport can be better handled by public conveyances. But the helicopter is going to give back transportation to the individual. After all, the air is free! Forty million helicopters would do a lot less damage—with safety devices of course—than forty million automobiles!

THE BIG BOMBARDMENT

By Evan Lewis



IN SPITE of the fact that millions of meteors bombard the Earth's atmosphere daily, very few penetrate, because they are already burned when they have penetrated at all deeply into the air blanket surrounding us. While some larger meteorites are penetrating—and this is perfectly normal—rarely do they penetrate the atmosphere in the same general area: the chances are many millions to one. Yet, surprisingly enough, this has happened despite the laws of chance governing the matter, and scientists are concerned with the unique phenomenon.

Recently, more than a half dozen meteorites of considerable size arrived in a region whose area was only a few square miles. This improbable event startled astronomers into postulating some upper-atmosphere interference to account for it. It has even been suggested that the detonations of the atomic bombs might have disturbed the ionic layers of gas overhead, in some obscure way affecting the atmospheric resistance to meteoric penetration. While such a catch-as-catch-can explanation seems labored and hardly within the realm of possibility, there is no doubt that the meteoric penetration may be attributed to more than coincidence.

High-altitude rocket observations have shown the existence of weird air currents traveling at hundreds of miles an hour. Possibly these air currents (more properly, blasts) in some way affect or concentrate the meteoric penetrations. Whatever the cause, meteor observers are making it a special point to check on concentrations, especially when they seem to be impossible—as these recent ones were!

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Tempermental Star

By Arch Weitzel

ONE OF the most exciting stars in the hemisphere, the *Eta Carina* has earned a reputation for violent outbursts. The star, which is visible only from the southern hemisphere, was first known to explode in 142 A.D. Its latest explosion may again cause the *Eta Carina* to complete with the brightest star in the sky for brilliance, before it again fades into obscurity.

Two leading astronomers—Dr. O. J. Eggen of the University of California Lick Observation, and Dr. Gerard de Vaucouleurs, of France—used special photoelectrical equipment in a recent study of this star. They found the star to be brightening slowly, and at the time of the recent study it was about four times as bright as it had been when last studied, the increase in brilliance undoubtedly due to the new explosion.

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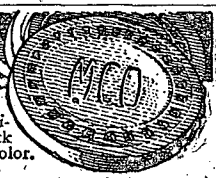

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KENSINGTON STONE — FACT or HOAX?

By Charles Recour

PROBABLY no other single science has been subjected so often and so regularly to hoaxes as archaeology. The famed "Cardiff Giant" case, in which a farmer palmed off a sculptured stone figure as a petrified man, is one of the most famous examples. For some unknown reason people believe they can delude the archaeologists more easily than other scientists. And perhaps that's true, because even the archaeologists can't make up their minds about what is true and what is false.

Some decades ago a stone was found in Kensington, Minnesota, buried in the earth on a farm. It was entangled in the roots of a tree and the farmer who dug it out, a man named Ohman, brought it to the attention of archaeologists because, not only did it look very old, but also it was inscribed with peculiar characters, much like some sort of writing.

It created a sensation. Philologists and language experts spent a great deal of time analyzing the script and came to the conclusion that it was written in runic characters. They deciphered the inscription, which purported to have been left by a party of Norsemen in the year 1362! Since this was so long before any other known visitors had come to America, and because it seemed hardly possible for Norsemen to have made their way over such a tremendous distance from the coasts, the scientists were inclined to cast doubt upon it.

In addition, the runes in which the message was written differed considerably from what was known of this script. Some of the words and characters seemed suspiciously close to modern English and Scandinavian terms. Eventually the stone was discredited and scientists came to regard it as evidence of another hoax.

Dr. William Thalbitzer, a noted Danish expert on runes, visiting the Smithsonian Institute where the stone is on exhibition, has been studying it in great detail and has come to the conclusion that it may be authentic. He makes this judgment in the light of some new knowledge that has been turned up about the runic characters. He says "...I cannot but waver in my doubt...", and he was one of the first experts to cast doubt upon it! While it is by no means certain that the Kensington Stone is real, there is certainly a strong case to be made for it.

It is difficult to imagine a party of Norsemen from Canada or Greenland or Nova Scotia making their way overland such a tremendous distance to the heart of Minnesota, but such a journey is not beyond the realm of reason. Norsemen were notorious travellers, evidence having been found of their visits in the most remote corners of the world. It is nice to think that they might have been able to make the journey—and be the first European arrivals in America!

PIG BOAT WITH A FUTURE

By Greg Wilson

ONE OF the brightest stars in the galaxy of super-weapons rising from the drawing boards into reality is the "atomic pigboat". Submarine development with conventional engines, or even with the highly touted Walther hydrogen peroxide engines, has just about reached the limit of its aims: the maximum speed of such ships is about twenty-five knots; the range is limited; and the over-all picture is just about that.

But the atomic submarine knows no such limits. Two are abuilding for the U. S. Navy, and perhaps several others are on the way behind the Iron Curtain. They promise a new dimension in warfare.

The potentialities are terrific. Consider the speed first of all. An atomic submarine may do better than thirty-five knots, which is forty miles per hour! That's traveling in any language. Actually, the limit set upon submarine speed will come, not from power requirements—an atomic engine knows no such limitations—but from "cavitation" effects; that is, disturbances of the water by the swift vessel and by the inability of screw propellors to transmit only a certain amount of power. If the atomic engine could be applied, rocket-like, to the propulsion of the pigboat, which would unfortunately cost its concealment, no such speed limits would exist.

The range of an atomic submarine, since fuel is not a consumable commodity, is unlimited. A small amount of uranium or plutonium suffices to enable the submarine to travel any distance whatsoever, even if it means encircling the Earth a few times.

Snorkel devices permit travel underwater

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with but infrequent surfacing for air. This adds to the effectiveness of the sub as an underwater killer.

The last, and perhaps the most important, extension of the pigboat's future lies in the marvelous electronic and sonic gear capable of detecting, sighting, aiming and, in general, serving as seeing eyes beneath the murky ocean depths. So well perfected have these devices become that, except in rare cases, straight visual observation is almost totally unnecessary.

In general, then, the submarine appears to have an unlimited horizon for the future. Even aircraft and rockets do not threaten it. About the only formidable enemy it need fear encountering is another submarine like itself. What a titanic battle would ensue should that happen!

As a matter of fact, certain submarines are being constructed exclusively as "killer" or "hunter" pigboats whose primary purpose will be the destruction of enemy submersible marauders.

The Battle of the Atlantic in World War II, with victory going to the British and Americans in their war against German submarines, spelled, apparently, the doom of the pigboat. Now atomic energy has shifted the balance to the submarine once more, and the future looks remarkably rosy for the undersea mariners.

FLUOROCARBON WORLD

By Jack Winter

TRADITIONALLY, chemistry has always been divided into two great fields, organic and inorganic. From the layman's point of view, the latter is replete with mathematical formulae, while the former is a literally malodorous subject. To the professional scientist, however, organic chemistry has been particularly appealing because it is a field which, despite already enormous discoveries, still has before it an endless future. Organic chemistry, which embraces principally the vast numbers of carbon compounds, includes in its scope living things as well as chemicals for industry.

Today, chemistry appears, like Caesar's Gaul, to have been divided into three parts rather than two. The third—and possibly the most important practically—is fluorocarbon chemistry. Ever since, a few years ago, chemists learned to replace the ubiquitous hydrogen of organic compounds with ferocious fluorine, a new world has

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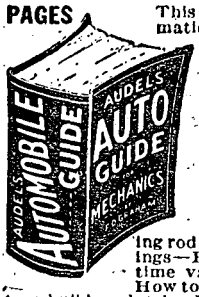

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An ordinary oil is a hydrocarbon. Substitute fluorine for the hydrogen and an oil results, but one which is incomparably better. It will not burn; it will not vaporize; it will not stiffen at low temperatures nor thin at high ones; it will not break down chemically; in short, it has all the properties of oil, except that it will not deteriorate with time, as does an ordinary oil. It is possible to seal in an engine with such oil, for the life of the engine!

The fluorocarbon compounds are not yet on the market in quantity. Fluorine is such a tough element to handle—it cuts through glass like a knife through butter—that the problems of mass production of the new fluorocarbons haven't yet been solved. But they will be. This is an organic-chemical century—in a few years it will be the age of fluorocarbons. And all of us will live that much better, just because fluorine has an incredible appetite for replacing hydrogen wherever it finds the common gas.

HOMO PUNY

By

Sam Dewey

MAN'S EFFORTS to improve his way of life have led to new developments in science and technology. And now he must improve himself to keep pace with the machines he builds and operates.

Man's vision is limited. His physical strength is limited. His ability to react to sudden changes is limited. Electronic radar-eyes may help his vision. Various mechanical or electrical powers may add to his strength. There are various mechanical aids which have been developed which can help him to adapt to sudden crises.

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MORE POWER... LESS METAL

Ed. Valle

YOU DON'T have to be a Nostrodamus to look into the not-remote future—say twenty or thirty years—to see the shape of things to come. "Coming events cast their shadows..." is truer today than it ever was. No oracle is needed, for example, to see that the gas turbine, that ubiquitous chunk of flame and whirling metal, is the motive power of the immediate future.

Gas turbines, through their use in jet aircraft, have been ballyhooed to high heaven, and the announcement of their use in trucks and cars is a perennial phenomenon. A cynic might ask "when?" when he hears all this touting of the gas turbine and fails to see the machine itself. All he has to do is look a little harder.

Exhaustive tests are being conducted *right now* with gas turbines installed in trucks—as the first step—and they're really showing the old gas and Diesel engines up. Probably the biggest factor preventing their more common appearance is the fact that the Korean conflict, along with rearmament, has shuffled the metals needed for commercial gas turbines into jet engines for planes. But when things quiet down, the turbines will start roaring.

A recent experiment had a two-hundred-pound gas turbine replacing twenty-five hundred pounds of Diesel! Furthermore, the turbine was one seventh the size of the ponderous Diesel. That's a big difference no matter how you look at it. The gas turbine's performance was superior to that of the Diesel in every respect save fuel consumption—and licking that is just a matter of time. Gear-shifting was halved, smoothness and power multiplied, and maintenance knocked down to nothing. After all there are only a very few moving parts in a turbine—think of a Diesel!

The gas turbine consumes fuel at too high a rate—now. That's its weakness, but it's only temporary. The engineers will knock that down with a little more research. And that consumption is somewhat counterbalanced by the fact that the gas turbine will burn almost anything, including old shoes and candle stubs. Not quite, perhaps, but there's a big price difference between kerosene or fuel oil and a practically unrefined crude oil.

Helicopters are using gas turbines too. The next step will be some adaptation to ordinary automobiles, although with the power package you can make from a turbine, the cars will probably use hundreds of horsepower, making the hot rods happy and sensible engineers crazy!

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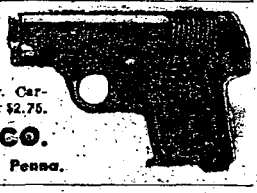
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THE BULBUOUS streamlined planes which hurtle through the air at subsonic speeds are sufficient for today's purposes, but certain facts are causing designers to examine new aeronautical forms whose fantastic appearance makes the work of science-fiction illustrators seem tame, conservative and not at all fantastic.

The particular fact that bothers designers is this: when a plane crosses the supersonic barrier, the air piles up in front of wings, tail surfaces, leading edges and fuselage forms so rapidly that it can't be pushed aside without creating turbulence and discontinuity in air flow. This results in loss of power, loss of lift, and poor flying qualities in general.

The remedy, of course, consists in making leading edges, sharp and razor-edged clean and cutting, so that they can knife through the piled-up air like a wire through butter. This remedy is practicable and its use can be seen by examining any of the newer jet planes which convey an impression of sharpness and "knifeyness."

But that still isn't enough. British designers have gone so far as to provide holes, a whole series of them, in the leading edges of wings wherein the air can flow through to the rear without turbulence. In order to resist the surprising abrasiveness of air flow, the holes are generally tip-lined with resistant bronze.

By logical extension of this idea, the shape of future fifteen-hundred-mile-an-hour jet ships can be predicted. They will take one of two forms. Either they will be practically nothing but floating wings with all services housed therein, including the motors, or they will take a tubular form —almost like a flying mailing tube. That is not a joke. Numerous designers have been working on the cylindrical hollow shell principle, and have found that it offers a minimum of air resistance.

The principle has been adapted, experimentally, and the lift and low air resistance have pleased the designers. The extension to high-speed aircraft follows at once. For speeds below that of sound the bulbuous, smoothly arcing surfaces of the ordinary streamlined plane serve their function extremely well. In an exact sense of the word, their shapes are "streamlined", the words stemming from the smoothly flowing streams of air washing over surfaces.

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